

RIGHTER'S BLOCK



*The Challenge of Doing Right, Even When
It Hurts*

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**I would like to dedicate this book to
several significant people in my life.**

To my Mom, Arlene Rimer Jason who
has always been a great example of doing the
right thing and who is a great mom.

To my Dad and Step-mom, Jim and Joyce Prim,
who opened their home for me to write this book
(loving me all the while) and especially to my Dad
for his friendship and lively discussions in theology.

And to all my kids, Colin, Aaron, Lauren
and Ashleigh. May they always choose
God's good way over any other thing.

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INTRODUCTION

I am afraid of heights. For that reason alone the lofty images of flying in a modern jet airliner at 35,000 feet are terrifying to me. In the aperture of 1993 I found myself doing just that flying over the heart of South America returning from my missionary assignment on the international field and caring not one bit whether the plane would crash or not. My primal fear had been transformed into absolute cold indifference, because of the pain that I was carrying at the time. My personal suffering had managed to flood the receptacle of all my hopes, dreams, feelings and faith and leave me drowning in unfeeling, hopeless discouragement. So, I didn't care if the plane crashed. I didn't care if we dove straight down at more than terminal velocity into the Bolivian altiplano. My theological training, my pastoral experience and my

faith in God felt useless. All of my degrees and personal knowledge felt like a lump of coal in my arsenal of faith. It didn't even make a good rock to throw at it all. My hurt was so profound, I just didn't care.

Upon returning to the United States and injecting myself back into church, albeit with a numb sense of disorientation, I found that most other people also didn't care. To some I had become a *persona non grata*, a onetime shining light transformed into something irreparably broken. To others I had become a pariah who no longer had the grace of man and most assuredly did not have the grace of God, to whom the only thing they were able to say was, "God can't use you anymore."

Our churches are full of people flying at 35,000 feet who from the outside often look fine, under control and prospering, but who are carrying a load so heavy of pain, brokenness and estrangement that they don't care if the plane in which they are riding goes hurtling to the earth only to crash and burn. Or they are so overcome by the power and deception of their suffering that they would choose to ignore the grace of their Lord and reject all of His good for the momentary pleasure of satisfying their feelings. They would consider discarding the way of Christ and replacing it with the way of man.

The depth of this experience is no trifle. The Christian experience does not inoculate us from the reality that the world without Christ struggles, has struggled and will continue to struggle with pain, suffering and loss. The reality is also clear that the church, not being immune from the experience, must confront it with the power that it has. Yet the church often fails in this confrontation, opting to isolate and insulate itself from those who are struggling with this dynamic, or, worse, excommunicating the aggrieved parties as the church hurls them to the dogs.

This is a book for Christians. It is my attempt to confront this most pervasive experience and offer a solution that flows out of what God says about this subject and my personal experience with applying what He says. In the conflict of my experience I came to a realization that God does have an answer for all of us who are assaulted by this frailty in our fleshly nature. I came to a place where a decision had to be made on my part that was either going to liberate me from the restricting nature of the load I was carrying or send me reeling into the morass of sin and denigration, all by my own hand.

I have endeavored to present this subject in a form that some have called “anecdotal theology.” Using story, both personal and, at least, personally known, I have

tried to present each of the chapters with some form of validating experience to support the Biblical realities of faith in the Living Lord Jesus Christ. I have used real events to make sense of the story of our Christian life and build it into a heightened theological work without using theological verbiage that tends to bog down readers (and often leave them more confused). I am a pastor at heart and my desire for this work is for the person who might be in the midst of this kind of an experience to find victory for today so that tomorrow doesn't look so bleak.

This is not a fun subject, however. Crashing into the earth often really seems more satisfying than doing it God's way. Even as I asked myself back then the question of whether to do what God says or try to feel better without Him, I already knew the answer. Out of this personal discussion and eventually running to the only one who could help me, I came to a verse in His word that is the basis for this book's angle. 1 Peter 4:19 says, "Therefore, let those also who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right." Doing what is right, even when it hurts is the overriding principle of this book. I have found that this truth is confirmed over and over again in scripture and in life.

I grew up in San Diego, California. It was no struggle to realize my formative years in that most beautiful place. Most of my time from Junior High through College was spent at the beach. I was an everyday surfer who had to somehow get into the water at least once per day, even if there were no waves. The surfing experience is augmented and I would add injected with more joy when it happens in the midst of the friendships that surfers enjoy. Sitting out beyond the surf line with your friends, enjoying each others' rides only adds to the wonderful experience that is surfing.

In much the same way, the experience of writing and endeavoring to produce something worthwhile is a process that finds itself more blessed when conjoined with the thoughts and help of others. This is my experience also with the writing of this book. Community makes us better and Christian community is God's way of reminding us, we are not alone in the fray.

I wish to thank the Southeast Baptist Church in Salt Lake City, Utah, for the kindness they expressed to me in allowing me a six week sabbatical to write this little book. It became a significant time of refreshing and blessed me beyond measure. I can only hope that this work blesses those wonderful people in like kind.

I also would like to thank several people who have encouraged me to write and who have had a part in this work's final form. Without a doubt, Jan Meadows has inspired me to be a better writer grammatically. If there are any weaknesses in grammar, I apologize. Judy Baker is also one who has encouraged me to be a "writer." Her model and encouraging comments throughout the process have been of great help to me in arriving at this place. The encouragement of the office staff of Southeast, Yolonda Poret, Sandy Witherspoon and Susan Boersma, can really not be measured. They have truly put up with my bad jokes, frenetic moments and my unfocused *modus operandi*. I also wish to thank my fellow pastors at Southeast: Mike Gray and Chad Whitehead. They have been sounding boards for my little endeavor into the writer's world.

In the surfing metaphor, there is always someone there in the lineup who is your best bud and most stringent encourager. They will tell you when you "ripped it good" and when you didn't quite make it. Leigh Peterson Prim, my beautiful wife, is that person for me. She has done the majority of the edits, spellchecking, thought clarifying and overall work to make this look like a book. Her expertise in seeing through the fluff to get to the stuff has been the most encouraging of all. I am not only blessed

with an awesome lady as wife, friend and lover, but she has helped me to see that perhaps I have been given something to say to the church in America to encourage and help us change for the better. Thank you, love.

Finally, none of this is worth anything without the presence and encouragement of the Lord Jesus Christ. He is alive, He reigns and He desires for each of us in our humble frames to come to the place where doing what is right is the norm, for His glory. I praise Him and thank Him as one who has come to realize that without Him I truly can do nothing of any eternal worth. To Him, I am forever grateful.

CHAPTER 1

What is right?

Uncles can be awesome guys. Nephews and nieces know this. I had two awesome uncles, both of whom were military men during the Vietnam War. The older one, who we called Uncle Boondocks, was in the Marines and the other, Uncle Rusty, was in the Army as a Green Beret. They were very different people at their core, but they had one common element to their makeup: they both knew how to laugh and to laugh with abandon. I adored my uncles. They made my brothers and I feel special when they were around. It was always like a holiday when they were visiting.

We got to see Uncle Boondocks more often, because he was stationed near our home in San Diego. He would come by the house and somehow we boys would soon all be in the family car driving on dirt roads out to the fields that surrounded San Diego at that time. Sometimes we would just go hiking with him out in those dusty open areas and other times we would take the family .22 to go shooting. Our uncle got his nickname because he always took us out into the back country of San Diego whenever he came by the house. He also took us to the local high school to throw the football around with him. He was a great athlete and we enjoyed being on his team, if only for a few hours. Those events were glorious for us boys.

Our Uncle Rusty was different. We did not see him very often. Growing up, it seemed like he was always at some private military live-in school far from San Diego. My grandmother and grandfather lived in Guam almost all my formative years and Uncle Rusty passed through town on his way from military school to Guam and back. We saw him during those short stays and looked up to him for his school uniforms that he often brought with him. He was becoming a military man and, to us kids, that was about as awesome as you could ever imagine.

Sometime during the Vietnam War, my Uncle Rusty, who had become a Green Beret, came to our house to

visit. We four boys were excited and happy to see him from the war, all dressed up in his army uniform and strategically placed upon his head the consummate sign of his service, the green beret. We were in awe. We didn't want to be anywhere else than near our uncle. I am sure we were a burden to him as we followed him around wherever he went, like a small flock of lambs following their shepherd.

The most glorious event came when he allowed each of us in turn to wear the green beret. Like waiting all day for the Matterhorn ride at Disneyland, we patiently endured the others' time of the beret until our moment finally came to pass. I can't speak for my brothers, but for me, this was about as wonderful as anything up to that time in my life. I could imagine myself all decked out like my uncle, looking sharp and ready to do anything for my country. I felt like I was a real Green Beret!

The dream faded significantly for all of us when the green beret turned up "missing in action." At first our uncle asked us boys where we put the beret. He assumed, of course, that we had taken it for our own unauthorized "dream sessions." I know that he saw the joy we had in wearing it and naturally thought we had run off with it somewhere in the house to enjoy its magical power. "Where did you boys put the beret? Don't worry about

getting in trouble, you won't get into trouble, I just need the beret." He did need the beret. As an Army Special Forces soldier, when he was obligated to be in uniform, he was obligated to be in complete uniform. Without wearing every element of his Army Greens, he was in danger of getting into trouble for being out of uniform. This included his head gear, which was the green beret.

So the family leadership, every adult in the house, began the grilling of the boys. Dad came and asked us about the beret. Mom came and scolded us and told us to tell the truth about the hat. Worst of all, Grandma, who was visiting from Guam, came and let us know in no uncertain terms that lying was bad and that we better fess up to the sins of lying and stealing and cough up the hat! It was Grandma who scared us more than anyone. She had a way of piercing you with her deep brown eyes and she knew. She just knew we had taken the beret and she was going to get it out of us any way she could.

However, we didn't take the beret. At least, I knew I didn't. If my brothers had taken the now notorious beret, one of them would have surely been celebrating his coup with the rest of us. We were like that as brothers. We wouldn't have let our joy go AWOL. Yet none of us were celebrating. It was pure misery to tell our Grandma, over and over and over that we were innocent of the illustrious

crime. No one believed us, not even our mom. We were doomed.

The truth, at this point of the great robbery, did not matter. Our uncle didn't want our truth. Our dad didn't want our truth. Our mom didn't want it. And Grandma, yes Grandma, she didn't want it either. We were telling the truth, but no one wanted what we knew to be so, to be so. We were without recourse. There was no way out of their refusal to accept the truth. It wasn't a relative truth. It wasn't the truth as we boys knew it. It was the truth, plain and simple, and nobody wanted it.

Truth is like that. It assaults us with its genuineness and legitimacy, and it compels us to accept it or reject it. Truth makes us decide if we will believe it or not. Its very nature obliges the hearer of the truth to react to its content. If the hearer rejects that content, the truth, if it is really the truth, continues to remain the truth. No one, by rejecting the truth, is able to invalidate that which is real, authentic, factual and absolute. Truth is immutable.

Natural law, the way the world works, has at its core the principle that reality is based on an overriding truth. Gravity exists, for example, and is a natural force of attraction between two or more entities that have mass. Light is electromagnetic radiation that scurries at

just over 186,000 miles per second in a vacuum. Air, to be breathable, must have at least 19.5 percent oxygen. These things are true whether one believes them, rejects them, or is even ignorant of them. Truth is truth. We live, eat, work, love, hate, hope and dream under this reality. Though we may question it, argue with it or reject it, matters not. Reality is not altered by our singular dismissal of life's natural law.

In the same way, we as spiritual beings are confronted with the truths of God that begin with the overarching fact that God exists. This foundation for spiritual life is the foundation for the Christian's faith. Hebrews 11:6 says that it is impossible to please God without coming to a place where one accepts the truth that He exists. The ancient Jews (and for that matter the modern religious Jews) acknowledged this clearly in the *Shemah*, where it says, "Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one!" (Duet. 6:4). They also reiterated this truth on the Jewish Tallit. This prayer shawl worn by Jewish men covers the head, and on the part directly over the head of the wearer is a prayer written in Hebrew directed to the King of the Universe! Clearly this is an acknowledgement of the existence of God.

This heritage is not lost on Christianity. All Christian denominations at least minimally have as a given that

God exists. They may exercise this truth with a wide spectrum of conviction, but the truth remains. God exists and He will not be denied. He rules, He cares, He loves, He heals and He continues to act upon the earth. This fundamental facet to the Christian faith is irrefutable, if God is God. This consistent message, flowing out of the Bible, God's word, is undeniable, if God is God and His word is His word.

What every believer in God must come to grips with, therefore, is the reality that He exists and has a demand on His creation. That demand is to submit to this truth about Him and toward Him. God, if He is God, has a purpose for His creation. We are not accidents of life, we don't live in chaos (although we may have chaos all around us), we have purpose as He sees fit to give us purpose and it is all real whether we like it or not; even if we would deny that truth.

Pastor Rick Warren, in his book *The Purpose Driven Life*, clearly reveals this secret to approaching life. Warren reminds Christians and non-Christians alike that we are not accidents on the earth.¹ This God who exists has purpose in what He does and that purpose includes every person on the earth. He has corporate and individual purpose for His creation and that purpose touches each of us where we are and in the midst of what we are doing.

We do not really live our lives out in a godless vacuum. He is with us and is still active in our midst.

The clearest presentation of this purpose is the Bible. In its pages God reveals Himself historically, creatively, consistently and continuously. Like a wonderful story full of action, compelling drama and worthwhile teaching, the Bible speaks of God's nature and desire for His creation. He seeks to share this vision with the object of His love throughout its pages and even goes so far as to reveal Himself in the flesh in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. God's truth is tenacious.

The tenacity of His character is best understood in its infallible nature. There is no error in God, He makes no mistake, He is not caught unaware, by surprise, or out to lunch. He is absolutely faithful, absolutely just, absolutely loving, absolutely eternal and absolutely in control. This One who holds the universe in His hands is able, willing and working in that universe. Calling Him the "Alpha and Omega" is no idle statement. His person holds the sum of all things and is the very source of all wisdom and knowledge. What He declares as holy is holy. What He declares as truth is truth. What He declares as right is right. Without a doubt, this One has stated what is right and what is wrong. There can be no confusion in understanding this basic element of His character. I am

well aware that many would ignore this, belittle this, or reduce this to some insignificant moral pabulum, but it doesn't change the affirmation of these truths from God's perspective about Himself or His creation from the pages of His Bible.

Now the concept of what is right versus what is wrong not only bothers me, but also bothers my culture. I know this because my culture struggles a lot with the idea of an absolute "right." The structure of our American culture has a foundation that is at least rhetorically Biblical and at most, in practice, historically Biblical. We are proud of our fore-fathers and their reliance on the Biblical message, God's providence and the citizen's faithful commitment to the cause of God and the emerging nation. Sadly, however, we have lost our moorings.

Our nation today wrestles with what is right because we can create so many seemingly contrary and compelling "what ifs." Our culture screams at the top of its lungs for justice, righteousness, and purpose according to the culture's view on these things. Our system wants to be the pivot pole for all decision and understanding when it comes to what is right and what is wrong. This egocentric position, therefore, makes all decisions pass through the filter of culturally centered mores. What our culture holds as right is right, today. It may change. What is

wrong is wrong, today. It may change. What this has bred in the participants of our culture is a generation of system schizophrenics. We really don't know if there is anything absolute and truth has become relative along with God and His righteousness.

I too am bothered by what is right and what is wrong because, based on which is which, I have to live according to how each of these fall out. To be honest, I don't like this because it is like truth; I am compelled to do something about it. This schizophrenic assault on my worldview makes me uncomfortable and that falls right back onto my participation in my culture. I don't like it because it doesn't make me feel good and my cultural context says, "If you don't feel good, there is something wrong with you." What is truly unfortunate in this is that even here in North America the Christian message validates this twisted point of view. Often I decide what I will do in my life based on how it will make me feel. Just like my culture, it is all about me. In trying to discern where the solid ground is for my life's activity, I find myself, along with my culture, asking "What is right, really?"

This dynamic is critical to every Christian's approach to life. If any one of us is going to arrive at the answer to the question, even though the process may make us feel like traitors, doubters, or worse toward God, we have to

confront our culture and our very own selves in arriving at the answer. This interrogation must happen. Unlike the interrogation of Grandma with the alleged thieving little boys, there must be a willingness to give and receive the truth. Part of this dynamic, and the most important part of the process, is to know there is a foundational truth somewhere. There is a “right” that can be known. There is a worldview that is consistent, truthful, righteous and clarifies all other things. It illuminates the darkness of wrong and augments the brilliance of that which is right. When we arrive at this determination to accept the rule of God over all things and His perspective on the same, we can begin a new adventure. This is often an unknown adventure for many Christians, for it will place Christians smack in front of a world of pain and loss and make them apply the truth about God and the truths He has given us to have victory in the midst of the yuck.

This honest course of action will help us see that God is still at work. It will afford us a new outlook on who He is and just how He uses “all things together for good” (Rom. 8:28). The exercise of our faith in this way will help us to understand the real nature of pain and how even pain can be an instrument of God’s grace. It will give us a place to always run for safety and peace in the

storms of life, even though the storm may touch us and affect us deeply.

Another important part of this process is the acceptance of the reality that the doing of right things is not always appreciated. In fact, we may find it is absolutely disdained, depreciated and altogether devalued by our world, culture and sometimes even our fellow Christians. Perhaps this latter response is the most disconcerting to the sensitive follower of Christ, but one must understand that the doing of right things has no escape clause for the believer. We are obligated to be “holy” as God Himself is Holy and that is directly related to the doing of good and right things.

It is at this point that those who choose the path of faithful living must decide if doing what God says is more important than their personal wellbeing. In dealing with this challenge we can make great headway in the experience of playing out the Biblical commands of God. If God’s word has an impact on Christians’ lives, we must obey. This may, in the context of our culture, lead to great disappointment experientially, but if God’s word holds true as I maintain, then He will use even our disillusionment to illumine us through the seemingly non-victorious moment.

So is there a right way? Is there an avenue of life that resides in truth and arrives at victory? Can the Christian truly trust God, His message and His empowering for the day to day? Is there a foundational “safe house” where one can run in the midst of the fray and have confidence that everything is still alright?

These questions are answered dead center in the truth concerning God. He exists and He cares for His creation. He has given a message of hope for all time in His word, the Bible. He can be trusted in all things no matter what we perceive is happening. He has offered a way of right doing, right thinking and right speaking which are as solid as the foundation of His word. His righteousness is like His very own character: eternal, pure, and worth relying on. In fact, His righteousness is personified in the Savior Himself. 1 Corinthians 1:30 says that God is the one who has placed us “in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption.” Jesus is the epitome of all that is right and He has imparted that righteousness to those who have responded to His offer of salvation. The believer’s faith in Christ is, as Romans 4:5 states, “credited as righteousness” by God to the one who stands in that faith.

The tension that we experience is real as we face the truth of God, His righteousness in Jesus Christ and our

earthly experience of pain, hurt, disappointment and chagrin. The four little boys did not take the green beret. Their maintenance of truth has never wavered. I asked my brothers recently if they had taken the beret. To the man, there was the response of absolute confirmation of innocence. Mind you, we were guilty of many other crimes against the family, our friends and the neighborhood, but we did not take the beret. The truth remains. Although the green beret was never found, its loss does not depreciate the truth, that the boys were without fault.

Like this realization, God's right is foundational. If one is willing to begin there with the God of all good and right things (righteousness), then there is a hope of dealing with the contrary experiences that we often tolerate and, at times, to which we succumb. In beginning with the basis that there is an absolute right, the Christian who desires to mature in the ebb and flow of life will find success in the middle of living. This maturing appreciation for the wonder of the workings of God will help each arrive at a refined stance where the doing of God things overrides all other considerations.

CHAPTER 2

The World Is Full of Pain

They were just kids playing like kids always play. The only difference was where they were playing. They were all children of *las afueras*, the outskirts, of the town in Uruguay in which I was living. Their poor community, built right next to the *basurero*, the dump, was on the edge of the more developed part of town and, thus, on the edge of the culture. As kids who were truly living on the fringe of society, instead of a playground with swings, slides and a sandbox, they had the dump that wasn't but a few yards from their crudely constructed homes. They

would not only play in the dump, but they would also scavenge for whatever riches they could find there.

Often, while throwing rocks or climbing on the piles of rubbish they would encounter one of those treasures. Maybe it would be some discarded piece of clothing, a broken piece of electrical appliance, or some other article cast off by those more privileged. It could even be a discovery of food, not too old, too moldy, or too rancid to leave in the dump. The dump was a wonder of the world right there in their backyard, filling their days with adventure and exploration.

These kids would usually share their discoveries with each other, as kids will do. The new discoveries would be passed around for all to see. They would all be appropriately awed by the surprises their corner of the world would reveal to them. Many times they would take the best things home to the family to share the wonder with those they love. Perhaps their find would have some use in their impoverished homes.

Many in South America (and the whole world, for that matter) who find themselves in other communities on the “edge of town,” experience much of the same dynamic. Scavenging is often the only way that many are able to make ends meet. The discovery of the occasional

“jewel” through this process often makes the difference between having enough and not having anything at all.

It was a similar scenario when two men in the town of Goiânia in the state of Goiás, Brazil heard about a dilapidated building on the edge of town that was said to have held some of that same kind of treasure. The two went to the abandoned building and found a machine that had been left behind when the company that had occupied the building had moved to another location. The significant machine still held much of its metal casing and spoke volumes relative to what it might fetch as scrap. The two took the machine apart to discover a stainless steel housing that was very heavy. The men knew that this amount of metal would get them a pretty penny, so they put the heavy object in a wheelbarrow and carried it home. After trying to open the casing some more at home, they realized it would be better to leave it as it was and sold the object to a local junk dealer.

Within only a few days the junk dealer had the container opened by some of his workers and discovered it was heavy because of the lead lining that the stainless steel canister had inside. He also discovered that within that lining was a capsule which contained a glowing blue powder. The item was such a novelty that he took much of the blue glowing powder home to show to his family

and friends. He also had his workers take the lead lining out so that they could sell the metal for scrap.

The junkyard owner showed the amazing find to his family. His wife saw how it glowed in the container he brought, while the husband even rubbed the powder on the face of his niece while commenting how much she looked like a princess. They also discovered that the glowing blue powder made their hands and fingers glow. They each passed the mysterious substance back and forth among themselves. They even commented how it might even be something “spiritual” that they were witnessing. The junkyard owner parceled out some of the substance so that others could share in this most wonderful miracle. They called some of their other friends over to enjoy this extraordinary occurrence. Some passed the object to others who rubbed the blue glow onto their inquisitive faces also. Some of the kids got involved in the process and the wonder of it all was shared with many more through the kids. Their innocence reigned as they shared the amazing discovery with all their friends.

I read the newspaper account of these people while I was a missionary in the country of Uruguay. The daily paper *El País* of Montevideo, the capital of Uruguay, ran the story in their section dealing with strange, unusual, or thought provoking accounts.² It seems the abandoned

building was a former radiological clinic which had changed ownership. The new ownership decided to move their location and took only one of the two teletherapy machines with them. The one that remained in the abandoned and dilapidated building was a model that used caesium-137, a very strong radioactive isotope, as its therapeutic element. Encased in its lead lined, stainless steel housing it was relatively harmless. Outside of its canister, it was lethal. That was what the two men had discovered. That is what they tried to open. That is what they sold to the junk dealer, who took it to his junkyard. That is what he opened and shared with his family and friends. That is what he painted on the face of his 6 year old niece. That is what the kids passed around so efficiently so that many of the community were able to enjoy the wonder of the blue glowing substance.

The article told how each of the individuals that had actually handled the radioactive material had their hands, fingers and faces exposed to a lethal amount of radiation. The two men who found the object developed burns on their hands when they accidentally opened the casing's controlled aperture. The junkyard dealer's wife and niece died from the direct exposure to the radioactive material within a month. Others who didn't handle the material in that fashion, yet were exposed, became gravely ill.

In all, four people died from the direct exposure to the material, twenty-eight became seriously contaminated so that they were hospitalized. 249 were identified as being significantly exposed both internally and externally. The state of Goias in conjunction with the Brazilian Army, the government's nuclear energy commission and other agencies performed over 110,000 individual examinations of people who were potentially exposed to the radiation. All of the homes that were contaminated were destroyed and tons of the earth under these homes were excavated and placed in safe storage, thus ending the worst radioactive contamination next to Chernobyl.³ The section of the newspaper that shared this story was entitled, "Oh!"

I don't think there are words better than "oh" for the response to that story. In fact, in reading that story, my question to the God that I was serving as a missionary there in a foreign land was, "How could this happen to all those innocent kids, parents and a whole city?" I was speechless at the impotence that I felt at the time in front of the pain that I know was being felt by those poor people at the catastrophic loss of their loved ones. As if that weren't enough, the suffering and pain that was being felt by those families, was being experienced in the

midst of suffering and pain in a place where there often didn't seem to be much hope anyway.

This is not a singular story to our world. People of all ages are living the experience of loss, hurt, and incredible suffering. In the area of basic sanitation and water supply, nearly one eighth of the world's population lacks safe water (that's nearly 900 million people) and 2.5 billion people in the world lack adequate sanitation. The latter number is approaching half the world's population and these statistics are only talking about the pain and suffering relative to our basic need for water. What about the problems of food, shelter, and personal safety? This is not even mentioning the areas that are below the surface of a casual examination of the problem of suffering. What about psychological suffering, issues of human sex peddlers, child labor and more?

The horror stories like those of Goiânia are never ending. It doesn't take much time reading the newspaper or surfing the internet to see the great wave of suffering that touches every continent on the planet. There can be no doubt that our world is in pain. To the average American Christian, this is sad news, but behind our fortress of cultural elitism, we have become desensitized from the world's other great truth (the first is that God loves the world and sent His Son to deal with that which

we could not deal with ourselves). The world is going to hell in a hand basket! We are not living in the “Age of Aquarius.” We are not progressing toward the fullness of man and the arrival of the utopian brotherhood of mankind. We continue and have continued our slow decay from the Garden to the grave.

Pain and suffering are the consistent commodities of the world and the world’s system. This should not come as a surprise to Christians in general and American Christians specifically. The word of God has told faithful followers for millennia that there was something wrong with the world. The Old Testament of the Bible communicates the story of the Fall where mankind, in the first couple, sinned against God and sin entered the earth. Sin having entered the world then brought its natural result. Romans 6:12 says, “Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned.”

The preacher in Ecclesiastes states this concept even more boldly when he views the world from a human perspective and comes to the conclusion that all is “vanity and striving after wind” (Eccl. 2:26). Such is the realization that the world, its system and its fruits yield nothing but thorns, thistles and misery. The *status quo* of the world and its system is one of pain, disappointment

and heartbreak. Granted, there are times of blessing and joy, but the main working element in the world is loss.

The consistent content of pain and suffering in the world is perhaps best seen in our American appetite for disaster. We now have television shows that keep us captivated for hours, bludgeoning us with death, misery and destruction. We have become a society which longs for these things to occur tacitly, so as to have another amazing reality show. No one would ever speak this truth out loud, but we are happy to view these things in others' lives as long as it doesn't happen to us. If we cannot be satisfied with the real, we only need to head to the nearest movie theater to view fantasy versions of the same on the big screen.

My wife and I often comment on the negative nature of our community's evening news. Stories of another gang-style murder, or rape, or some child being abused, stolen or worse are common fare on every channel. In our home, we have become news watchers that can only handle the weather and sometimes even that is too much. My wife, in fact, has gotten all the channels' schedules down as to when they each will broadcast their weather prognostications. She is like a weather wizard with the remote as she flashes to and from the channels in search for each of the stations' idea of how tomorrow's weather

will be. I can tell you she has no time for the other news, because it is rarely, if ever, good.

What is truly tragic, in arriving at this understanding, is the reality that this is the consistent result of a world without the help and support of God. Our world and how it works can do nothing to completely overcome this force of harm. We may at times do wondrous things that help others, change lives and heal for a while, but the world and its mandate of pain and suffering are like a train, hurtling down the tracks, whose brakes are gone. Moreover, the Christian is not exempt from the effects of this unfortunate drama.

Pain and suffering reign on the earth and no one is excused from its influence. Though we Christians do know the One who can make a difference, we are not let off the hook from living in a world whose basic ambiance is so disastrous. In fact, faithful followers around the globe are experiencing a new wave of persecution for their faith. One Christian advocacy group estimates that there are more than 200 million Christian people who are currently living their faith under the hand of physical persecution (see www.persecutedchurch.org). They add that this phenomenon is generally not even acknowledged in the churches of the west.

The scripture is clear about the response that Christians need to have concerning this. They first need not be surprised by it. 1 Peter 4:12 says, “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you.” Peter acknowledges the norm in the world and specifically the fact that the Christian is the object of that suffering. We must not be surprised that it exists and that even the Christian can be found in its crosshairs.

Later on in verse 16 of chapter 4, the readers are encouraged to respond in an unusual manner to the sufferings at the hands of the world. Peter says, “But if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but in that name let him glorify God.” Throughout the rest of the New Testament, there is an acceptance of the fact of pain, suffering and sorrow in the world. The believer in God is not only susceptible to this consistent tragedy, but often finds himself the very target for the pain. Yet even as a target, the dictated response of the faithful is to continue doing the right thing.

Christians need to be reminded that, although they are not excluded from this experience, they do have an Advocate to whom they may run, One who has promised that He will help them through it all, even if it results in

their death. The difference between those who have this privilege and those who do not have a relationship with God is the latter has no recourse but to succumb, while the former, even if he dies, continues to have a future beyond this world. For the believer, God has promised to fill the lack that we may have in confronting this burden. Perhaps this is the image that we are given in Revelation 7:9-17, where the multitude who have come out of tribulation, are led to the water of life and every tear that they may have is wiped from their eyes by God Himself.

It has been my experience in nearly 30 years of Christian ministry, that those who have come to appreciate this truth, are those who tend to live consistent victorious lives, whether in pain or not. This does not mean they are fatalists in their approach to this dynamic in their lives, throwing up their hands as if to say “whatever” to the pernicious presence of pain all around them. They have come to see that the world holds nothing eternal for them and they are able to differentiate between the power of the temporal and the eternal. For these victorious believers, there is a sense of God’s presence in all they do. They are able to see the silver lining in almost all they endeavor. Their comportment is nearly always based on what the Bible would have them do. They

are normal people. They are not weirdoes. They have trusted God. They have trusted what He has said. They have committed their way to Him and are acting on that commitment, even though the world is full of pain.

CHAPTER 3

All Pain Hurts, but Not All Pain is Bad

I hate needles. I know that as a medical device they have helped save millions, but I really don't like needles. I especially don't like needles when they are attached to a syringe or an I.V. That only means that someone is probably going to get stuck with one of them. Needles hurt when you are poked by them and they don't feel good either. It doesn't even matter how pretty and sweet the nurse is that uses them on you. Needles hurt.

My brothers and I were generally hellions growing up. It hurts to say that. I think of myself as a pretty nice

guy for the most part, but I would have to defer to the obvious facts. My brothers and I were rowdy kids and notorious in our neighborhood for it. Perhaps that is why no one believed us, even when we were telling the truth. That kind of hurts also.

I remember as a kid the times when we had to get our vaccinations. Growing up in the sixties, we were made to get all our inoculations. I am sure it was for good reason, since I did not succumb to any of the childhood diseases for which there were inoculations. I do remember many of the inoculation events for the four Prim boys. Many of these episodes ended in a similar fashion, with the four Prim boys rubbing their arms or backsides, crying as they got back into our parents' car.

I don't think I will ever forget my first Sabin vaccination. The Sabin vaccine was an improvement to the Salk vaccine for polio. Where the Salk vaccine used a dead or inactivated poliovirus, the Sabin vaccine used an attenuated or live, but not virulent, poliovirus. Up until that time it was all about a poke in the arm or a shot to the bum. I remember it was being administered in the auditorium of my elementary school. It seemed like the whole school was there and the whole school was scared. I didn't want to cry in front of all my friends, and especially not in front of the girls. I vaguely recall my

parents being there with us and trying to calm us down before the inevitable needle.

Perhaps my parents were there for more than moral support. I remember one time before the Sabin vaccine incident, when we all went down to the Public Health building in our hometown. I clearly recall our dad taking us into the building to get the needle. When my brother Bob saw the tray with all the syringes and, of course, the bank of needles with the syringes, it was too much for him. He bolted out the door of the clinic screaming his head off and there was no one who was going to be able to stop his full retreat from Public Health. You can imagine, what was good enough for Bob was good enough for the rest of the Prim boys. We all followed our dad, who was chasing Bob, out the door to freedom and a needle-less celebration. I don't remember if we went back in or not. I suspect that we didn't. My dad, however, told me that we boys had to be there because both our parents had to get shots, not us. That's how much we boys hated needles.

So there we were ready to get the needle again at my school. As we filed in to the auditorium, I know there must have been sad music playing somewhere, if only in my head. I ran the scene in my mind again and again as I waited my turn. There was the smiling nurse, long

needle, full quart-sized syringe and the gentle music of mirth in the background. The shock of our young lives awaited us when it came to our turn for the vaccine. The Sabin vaccine was an oral vaccine. All we had to do was drink this little cup full with the vaccine in liquid form. It didn't even taste bad. What was supposed to be painful turned out to be anything but painful. We exited the school auditorium as conquering kings, arms held high, glorying in the victory over the evil beast of pain.

Pain is like that, even if it is only imagined in preparation for its impact. It really hurts. Pain elicits that kind of reaction because it obviously doesn't feel good. The most amazing thing about pain is that it is consistent. Pain always hurts. That sounds like an absurdity, but pain, all pain, always feels bad. It hurts whether it is physical, emotional, psychological, or even imagined. Pain never truly is absent in the human condition. Like a small bug that flies around one's ears, you always sense its presence just out of reach and it won't go away.

Though pain has been a continuous aspect of treatment in the medical field, it seems that it has only been in the last few years when the concept of pain management has matured. There are now specialists whose sole concern in treatment is the control of pain in the patient's experience. Perhaps one of the most

noticeable new aspects of this trend is the pain scale chart of happy to sad faces numbered one to ten. Doctors know how common pain is and they are continuing to try, as best that they can, to confront the beast. They know that it is difficult, so the terminology is “manage” rather than remove. Pain is “Harvey the Rabbit” for everyone, he is not seen, but he is there lurking.

One of my friends is a medical doctor and he has told me how frustrating it is to treat those in chronic pain. The medicines that are available can only go so far. Eventually they will hit a wall of ineffectiveness. He has said to me that the meds can never make the pain go away and the frustration of that reality leads to a trap of becoming desensitized on the part of the provider. He said to me that, “You can get callous with the pain of others.” His implication was that those who should be empathetic can become like rock to the hurt all around them.

Pain comes in all shapes and sizes. There are traumas that are purely physical in nature which can bring such excruciating pain that one cannot stay conscious. Burn victims complain of the absolutely horrific pain associated with their injuries. Some pain flows out of deep emotional problems that may have its roots in childhood mistreatment, losses in relationship, or some

other emotionally tied hurt. Other manifestations of hurt and suffering may leave deep psychological scars or be even brought about by some psychological injury. This is not even to mention the possibility of this occurring in the context of one's imagination, where there is no physical pain involved directly.

Pain also has a spiritual element. The Bible records many instances of pain, suffering and hurt. Childbirth is painful and God, in recognizing the consequence of sin coming into the world, proclaimed to Eve, and to every other woman who follows her, that she would have multiplied pain in childbirth. I delivered all of my children myself, at home, and I can assure you that the woman works very hard in childbirth and pain goes right along with all of her work. The wonder of it all is, however, that the end result is the miracle of a new life, but it comes about through great pain.

The pain of sin itself is directly identified by Solomon's admonition to the people of Israel to turn to God when they are in that condition. In 2 Chronicles 6:29, at the dedication of the temple in Jerusalem, Solomon says in his prayer to God that the people should direct themselves to the temple, "Whatever prayer or supplication is made by any man or by all [God's] people Israel, each knowing his own affliction and his own pain." Job 15:20 states

that, "The wicked man writhes in pain all his days." Obviously, sin brings pain.

The word of God also acknowledges the hurt that can come from the emotional and psychological aspects of the human experience. Job's friends come to comfort him in the midst of his great anguish in Job 2:13, "For they saw that his pain was very great." Proverbs 14:13 says, "Even in laughter the heart may be in pain, and the end of joy may be grief." Normal life has as fundamental facets the components of sadness, loss, pain, suffering and hardship, because the process of living is difficult. It is also true that great things are a part of the flow of life, but it is quite clear that these negative aspects of life experience leave no one untouched.

Even the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom are difficult endeavors. The scriptures reveal in Ecclesiastes 1:18 that, "in much wisdom there is grief, and increasing knowledge results in increasing pain." The desire to grow in knowledge and wisdom is costly. It is a quest that any college student will tell you drains energy from its protagonist. It costs in time, money and the sweat of study, not to mention the focus demanded for educational success. Perhaps we have the old saying in English that, "Ignorance is bliss," for a very good reason.

Then there is the incredible sorrow of having to experience persecution. Standing for one's faith often presents a set of parameters of suffering that confront the faithful. Jesus Himself says in Luke 21:16-17, "...you will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death, and you will be hated by all on account of My name." The history of Christianity gives us some of the most spectacular examples of standing for the faith. Stephen, Paul, James, and according to tradition, every other disciple of the 12 except John had this experience of pain through some form of persecution.

As if that were not enough, there is the pain and suffering that one may experience when God rebukes, reproves, corrects or trains His servant. The greatest passage in the Bible that speaks to this fourfold possibility is 2 Timothy 3:16-17, where it is the word of God that is profitable for each of the above. Lamentations 1:12 echoes this truth as God's righteousness is played out in the life of the rebuked city, Jerusalem. "Look and see if there is any pain like my pain which was severely dealt out to me, which the LORD inflicted on the day of His fierce anger." God spans His children for their own good.

The list of the Biblical types of pain and suffering could go on and on, but one thing that stands head and

shoulders above the rest is the loss that will be experienced in disbelief. Those who reject the message of God's grace through His most able Son will die eternally. John 3:16 says that if one believes in Christ, that he will have eternal life. The one who doesn't believe, will perish. Revelation 20:15 says, "...if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire." The passage clarifies that the lake of fire is the second death. It is the death that does not end; the death that follows our earthly death. It is, in some sense, eternal death without God, without recourse, without hope.

These examples lead to a natural question. How do we fall victim to this set of hurts? We already know that pain is a common experience in life, but pain does have sources. Sometimes the sources are from within. We are sometimes the protagonists of our own pain and suffering. Perhaps it is our sin in choosing the things we know are contrary to what God would have for us. Maybe it is just being stupid at the right time.

Sometimes it is the poor choice of another that has an effect on us. It could be someone else's sin or their dumb mistake with us in proximity to the act. We can feel the force of others' actions miles away from the actual event, because of the relationship we have with the individual or individuals in that moment. Like a rock thrown into

a high altitude lake on a windless day, the wave that is generated by that rock will touch every shoreline of that lake. So we too can be affected by the sins and actions of others.

Sometimes there are disastrous things that happen that no one can prevent. Hurricane Katrina was not going to be stopped by anyone. The force of that storm was uncontrollable. Its path was not going to be changed, its power was not going to be diminished and its effects on the land were not going to be stopped, once they were put into motion. The storm was nobody's choice and nobody's action. No matter the desire of all New Orleans, that storm was going to arrive.

Another part of that disaster, though, could have been avoided. The human response to the news that a hurricane was bearing down on New Orleans could have been changed. More lives could have been saved, more people could have been evacuated completely and better preparations could have been made to evade the suffering that overtook that poor city and her population. There could have been better human decisions made in regard to the potential of the storm, minimally, even a better acceptance of the possibility of a great disaster.

All pain hurts, but not all pain is bad. There are some types of pain that are even good for the one who

experiences the hurt. There are at least three types of “good” pain. There is corrective pain, curative pain and instructive pain. Each of these, although not feeling good, can result in a positive change. Many of these types of pain conclude in some kind of modification in the person’s life. Corrective pain should result in a change toward that which is in error to that which is confidently right. Curative pain moves the person from sickness to health. Instructive pain has the goal of adding to someone’s knowledgebase.

Hebrews 12:5-8 deals with the corrective aspect of pain. The discipline of God toward His children is not exercised to hurt His children, rather, it is to correct their waywardness and set them back on the road of righteousness. In many ways, this type of pain is applied in order that the recipient might be re-trained or re-instructed back to the right. Christ’s aim in correcting us in this way, even if it may seem to hurt or even really hurt, is to bring us back into right relationship with Him. In some sense, it would be like a soccer coach who sees a player not following the game plan. In taking the player off the field and substituting him for another, he is not kicking him off the team. Instead, he is allowing the player the opportunity, through the correction of not playing, to see what he should have been doing so as to

get it right the next time. God cares enough for His kids, to spank them appropriately or re-instruct them back to right living.

Curative pain is similar to corrective pain in that the goal is to bring the person from where they are in sickness to a better place. The cure is often a regimen of health producing actions that, in their core, may lead to some discomfort, mild irritation or even lasting scars. God's purpose is, again, the restoration of the whole and healthy person. This encompasses not only physical sickness, but also emotional, psychological and, of course, spiritual sickness. Recently, I had an operation to remove a polyp from my left vocal flap. The problem was so severe that it was affecting my job as a worship leader in my church. I normally have a good singing voice, if I don't say so myself, but I found that my voice would change pitch and quality without any warning at all. In removing the polyp, I was told by the doctor that I could not talk for a solid month. That was a pain in and of itself. I had to write everything down on a portable dry erase board in order to communicate. Mum was the word. Pastor Scribble became my new name.

After the month was over, I was allowed to carefully begin speaking, but was absolutely forbidden to sing. I realized how important this was almost immediately,

when my throat would begin to ache from even a simple session of speaking. The pain was real in the recovery, but I was, after about 3 months, able to return to my normal singing levels and leadership again in my church's worship services. However, it never would have happened without the pain of surgery and the months of recovery.

Psalm 32 in verses 8-9, admonishes the reader of the psalm to not be like a donkey or a horse. The imagery of this passage is trying to communicate God's desire for the righteous person. He wants the learner of righteousness to be supple, open and willing to learn. There is no room in God's economy for obstinate learners. If He must, He will use the accoutrements that are available to teach the student what He must. If they were a horse or a mule, He will use the bit and the bridle to get them to learn.

I have a friend who is a police officer. He has been checked out on the use of the taser to control an unruly suspect. There are strict parameters for the use of this controlling weapon in our state's police force. The taser is an electro-shock weapon that is designed to fire electrodes that deliver an incapacitating, but nonlethal electric shock to the body. One of the most interesting parameters for its use is that for a police officer to be approved to use the device, he must receive a controlled shot of the taser. He must know the pain of the taser

to be able to use it on anyone else. I suspect that this instructive pain must make the user of the taser very knowledgeable and very wise.

Pain, all pain, hurts, but it has a pitfall. Pain, just like our other feelings, can deceive us. It can deceive us based on its nature. Because pain doesn't make us feel good, we tend to shy away from those things that inflict it. We just don't like to hurt and that hurt can mask and occlude the truth of what is really transpiring. If we are going to have success in our Christian life, we must come to a place where we can identify what kind of pain we are experiencing. With this knowledge in hand we will be able to carry on with the life God has given us in agreement with His purposes. This can happen even in the midst of great suffering.

Job is probably the best example in scripture, outside of Jesus, of dealing with the subject of suffering. In the story laid out in the book of Job, everything in Job's life was going the way of greatness and success. His family was great in number, his earthly worth was significant to say the least, and he was approved by God for his righteous character. Job had it all and had, as they say, "No worries."

Enter the dragon, the accuser, the destroyer, Satan. The Bible is not completely clear where the meeting took

place, perhaps even in the throne room of God, but there was a meeting of the “sons of God.” Most Bible scholars believe this to be a gathering of the angelic host before the Lord in heaven. On that day, Satan presents himself also before the Lord God. In the gathering that takes place, God asks Satan where he has been. Satan replies he has been roving around on the earth. God asks him another question concerning the man Job. He asks Satan if he has seen the quality of Job in his righteous character and his devotion to God. Satan spends no time in responding by identifying how blessed Job is by God, protected by God and that if Job were to have all the blessings taken away, then he would curse God to His face. So God gives permission for Satan to take away all the material blessings of Job’s life, even to his children, to prove to Satan that the character of the man was consistent with what God had testified. And so it was. Not only in the loss of all Job’s possessions, but eventually even his very life was touched by Satan as God gave him permission to exercise his power in the life of Job through personal suffering and pain.

What transpires after that encompasses the bulk of the message of the book of Job. Job’s friends come to comfort him and a dialogue of 34 chapters ensues. Job’s friends come to comfort him and end up challenging his

insistence of innocence of sin toward God. The text tells us even in Job's loss of possessions, family and physical health that he did not curse God or sin against Him. Each of the friends presents the view that Job had to be in sin, because he was suffering.

The deception of pain, in the midst of righteous effort, affects us. Deception is its greatest power. When we hurt, the hurt creates in us susceptibility to making poor choices. These choices are based on what we perceive through our pain and that filter distorts the reality of our great God's power. Romans 8:28 states boldly, "God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose." Job maintained his righteousness with his friends. God already knew this about him as he had already declared it to Satan. The reality was that God was at work whether Job could see it or not.

All pain hurts, but not all pain is bad. In the book's ultimate conclusion, God reveals Himself as the last word on righteousness, knowledge and power. What greater decision can each of us make, than to submit to Him and trust that He is able to take all our pain, suffering and loss and use it for His purpose? I have heard it said, "God never wastes a hurt." The inoculation for life is a Job like insistence of trust in God, not giving in to the

effect of the moment. 2 Corinthians 4:17 echoes this sentiment when it says, "For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal." So, as the text continues to say, we might not "lose heart."

CHAPTER 4

All Righteousness is Right

Her name was Addie Realrider when she died. She was born in 1882 and lived for 65 years in Oklahoma. Her birth name was Addie Troth. It is said that at a very young age she married an older man and changed her name to Addie Yellowcalf. She was left a widow some time later and subsequently married again. Her people are known as the Skidi band of the Pawnee nation. She was a full blood Pawnee from that band, fluent in the Skidi dialect of the Pawnee language and also the English language, which she could both read and write. She was by the standards of the world not an exceptional person,

but she held a prominent place in the lives of many. She was affectionately called “Aunt Addie” by many and to those who knew her much more intimately, like my father, she was “grandma.”

She lived on Kansas Street in the small town of Pawnee. Her house was much like herself. It was a simple house of the time with wood floors that had begun to shift just one side of level. The wood frame building had been painted at one time with some sort of white color that had begun to peel and reveal the natural wood underneath. It was a weathered house which contained two small bedrooms, a kitchen-dining room, a very small room off of the kitchen, and the two most important rooms in the house, the living room and the back porch.

The back porch was screened in for all the bugs and such that make up a normal Oklahoma experience. It was accessed through the backdoor which not only lead to the porch, but also to the outhouse that was stationed a convenient twenty yards from the house. The outhouse promised relief for the entire family of six or more, depending on who might be visiting. It periodically was moved east or west a few yards when the hole was full. The backdoor made the porch important because it was the main entrance to the house. Not by design, but by its usage.

Many of those who would call Addie, aunt, would come to visit her arriving at the backdoor. "Oh, aunt Addie, how are you doin'?" They would herald their arrival. It was a common practice, evidently, to make those visits just about meal time. Aunt Addie was known for her hospitable spirit and no one was ever turned away. "Oh, come in, come in, are you hungry," was the usual response. "We were just about to eat, come join us." Many a meal was rationed to allow for a few more to enjoy the kindness of this straightforward Pawnee woman.

The other important room of the house on Kansas Street was the living room. There, placed strategically in the middle of the room, was the rustic wooden rocking chair, Addie's rocking chair. Hung directly above the chair was a bare light bulb whose socket was attached crudely with a twisted pair of electrical wires. Addie's custom was to read regularly under the light of that singular bulb. Her common companion at those times was her Bible. She had a consistent reliance on the word of God and prayer. Much time was taken by my great-grandmother Addie, in reading the message that God had for her life and praying for the concerns of those around her, both near and far. It truly showed in all she did from the time of her baptism in 1912 in the little Indian Baptist Mission to the end of her life.

She was tall for her time, standing about 5' 7". Since I knew my grandmother well, Addie's daughter, I can imagine Addie's face. She had high cheek bones like many Native Americans since they are clear in many of the photos I have seen. She must have had skin similar to my grandmother and my dad, smooth and tan, soft yet weathered. I also can imagine her smile, broad and full of teeth, like every other member of our family. I know she had black hair, but my father tells me that he only knew her with graying hair. Her eyes must have been full of life, for all she had seen, known, experienced and the love that they held. Her love for her children and grandchildren is quite evident, for my father has relayed to me that "Grandma Addie" was the personification of love in her very person to him.

Her good sized hands were strong and well worked. They were as used to planting corn, making dinner, washing clothes, and holding the Bible she read regularly as much as loving and correcting her grandsons. Her loving character would come out in, sometimes, interesting ways. She was very fond of hairnets and usually had her hair up and covered with a net. She would often ask her grandsons to come over to where she was seated by the wood burning stove and check to see if there were any bugs in her hair. My father is almost positive that this

was so they could massage her scalp while looking for the bugs that they never found.

My dad also describes her humorous side which was a regular part of her interacting with the grandsons. She would say to the boys, "Pile up the chairs, boys and I will take off my shoes and jump over them." The boys would dutifully find the few chairs that were in the modest house and stack them up, longing to see their grandma jump over the mountain they had created for her. She would take off her shoes and jump over the shoes, just like she promised. She was a consistent beacon of love that held down a not so significant place in the world by the standards of the world, but as my father says, "She was my everything."

He told me of her great concern for one special Pawnee during the Second World War. Alex Matthews, a full blood Chaui band Pawnee, was a sergeant in the U.S. Army in the Philippines when the Japanese invaded the islands. He was part of the 80,000 U.S. and Filipino personnel who surrendered to the Japanese on the island of Corregidor.⁴ Addie, at hearing the news that one of the Pawnees' own had been captured, began a daily prayer for this soldier. Addie would gather my father and uncle together and have them join her in praying for Alex. "O God, watch over Alex Matthews, keep him

safe, protect him and bring him home to his people,” was a usual prayer. She reminded the boys to do the same for this one who was in such danger.

Alex Matthews survived the Bataan Death March where many did not. He survived the death ships of the Japanese as they were transported to work, much like slaves or worse, for their captors. He survived incarceration in the prisoner of war camps enduring awful conditions. He finally returned home to the United States, 42 months after surrendering, back to his people. He was the object of great concern for his safety in that insignificant living room of Addie Realrider. He was the object of the faithful prayers of a simple follower of Christ. He was the object of the consistent righteous act of caring for another soul without wavering, entrusting him into the hands of a faithful God.

Righteousness and the doing of the same is hard work. One reason for this appraisal of righteousness is its contrary nature to the world system. As has already been pointed out, the world is not in harmony with what God desires, says, or does. This then impedes our proper evaluation of its worth in a temporal setting. We can affirm the eternal nature of right doing without any problems, but we are left empty when the act or acts of righteousness come up short in the here and the now.

We often are not given the privilege of seeing clearly the results of good things done in our earthly context.

It is hard work because when one does not see the results of their acts of goodness, there is an implication that somehow God is not real, does not care, or may be too busy for us. Many times it may seem what one has done has had no positive result whatsoever. Doing things, then, God's way sometimes looks absolutely stupid to us. We may come to the conclusion that what we purpose to do in being submissive to God is not ultimately approved by man and, perhaps, not even noticed by God. Some may even believe that they have made a mistake or even not heard or understood God correctly. So what is it worth to do it God's way?

Addie Realrider cared for her neighbors and it left an impression on her grandson. My dad continued to have the same attitude in himself of receiving the "whosoever's" of the world into his house. When I was growing up and someone, anyone, would come by our house at dinner time, there would be an automatic invitation to them to join our family for dinner. I can remember many meals when the door-to-door salesman would arrive just about dinner time and they would be asked if they had eaten. If they hadn't, they were invited in for the meal. Where did that come from? How did my father acquire that

attitude of grace and hospitality? It seems obvious that this righteous character was modeled for him in the life of this humble woman.

Addie Realrider had a love for God's word and speaking with Him regularly. My father is convinced, especially since he has come to a place of trusting Christ for his salvation, his grandmother, Addie Realrider, prayed then for him now. She prayed that he might have come to know God, trust God, follow God and live righteously. She prayed that he and the rest of the family might turn to live in such a way that God's righteousness would be seen in all her children. Her family has become both great in number and significant in character.⁵

Today, my father's section of the family has two pastors, two part time ministers, two volunteer worship leaders and all his children and grandchildren are believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. It is a legacy that was passed down from a humble beginning to a growing and maturing understanding of the call of God on, at least, my father's branch of the family. 1 Corinthians 15:58 encourages the followers of Jesus Christ to remain faithful to the calling by living a life of righteousness no matter what things may seem. It commends the reader to know that the work that they do for the Lord is "not in vain."

Righteousness stands the test of time. The seed that is planted in faith, according to the will of God as it can be known through His word, will have success. This success is solely based on God's expectation. It does not depend on our control or manipulation. Our task is to obey and that is the only criterion. It is our privilege to join along with Him in this endeavor of planting seeds of righteousness and leaving all the results to Him. He will accomplish His purposes, if He is God. So, our job is to trust that He will bring about what He wants and just live out His will as best as we can discern it.

Proverbs 3:5-6 encourages the reader to "trust in the Lord" fully without any dependence on our own cognition and God will do His part. The word "trust" in this passage carries with it the idea of reliance upon something or someone. The Hebrew word is used here as a command to the faithful to have confidence in God and what He can bring to the playing field of life and when he or she does, the Lord will work mightily in their life.

Addie Realrider never saw the greater results of her consistent faith, except in the area of the return in safety of Alex Matthews from the war. Perhaps the lesson in that picture is that God gives us enough to keep going in obedience to His commands. It surely does not give

us a picture of our right to see it all. In the word of God we see constant admonitions to recognize that all things, all works, all glory and honor and praise are for Him, to Him and through Him. There is no room for our wills in the economy of God, but to do His will.

The miracle in all this is that despite our puny need to see it all come to pass God will “get ‘er done”! We don’t have to worry or fret or wiggle the circumstances. If His overarching desires will be done, then we ought to be about signing up for the same. Choosing to do God stuff is not a bad choice. For those who believe in Christ and are called by His name, it is THE ONLY CHOICE. The confidence that the believer has is not just concerning his own salvation, but also the knowledge that God is really at work on the earth and that He does use those He has called for His purposes.

One of the consequences of not making that choice as a believer in the Lord, is arriving at the place where the believer looks like everything else that the world produces. There is a distinctive look to the faithful follower of righteousness. He or she looks different, talks different and acts different. Some would say they are weird and maybe they are, but their weirdness comes from a safe and sane place. Man’s uprightness and the doing of righteousness flow directly from the source of all

righteousness. God and His way will be the fundamental thing that stands at the end of time and those who know Him and do His work (righteousness) will accompany Him in that day.

Gentleness, hospitality, love, serving, and all the other facets of God's expressed set of righteous acts have in their core the nature of their creator. So, the one who is connected to God and does those things is about eternal work. The one who participates with the Creator's overarching character is about God stuff. The effect of their faithfulness to God in this area will be seen forever, even though it may not even be seen in close proximity to the act itself. It will abide.

There are not many things that stand the test of time like participating in the right work of God on the earth. The Parthenon in Athens, Greece, was built in the 400s B.C. It endures today, but not like the righteousness of God which will last forever. The pyramids of Egypt have stood in their places for thousands of years, but the years pale before the eternal nature of the righteousness of God. All of man's human-sourced works will never have the enduring quality of perpetuity. All that we do, say and create have no correspondence to the quality and infinite nature of doing godly things.

My question to myself and any other believer in Christ is whether we should be about the puny things in which we invest ourselves here on earth? Or should we consider the wonderful privilege we have been given to do eternal stuff? Part of the test that we have been given by God is whether we can get over ourselves, our disappointments, and observations of others concerning this work with God and do it right. We must initially do it right directly toward God in accepting Him as Lord and Savior. We must then do it right by obeying His commands, directives, advice, will and word. This venture may not have outcomes according to our timetable, but the outcome of godly investment in righteousness is assured.

Investing in the righteousness of God begs the collection of the investor's heart, plans, body and hopes and depositing them into a trustworthy Lord. If we are to be buying stock in the great perpetual market of God, we must give ourselves away to the One who is able to keep it all. Paul says in 2 Timothy 1:12 that he was convinced that God was absolutely able to keep Paul's investment in God's work until heaven. God has the resources and the power to make that investment pass the test. It is His desire and expectation for every believer. The only question then, for the believer, is whether he is able to

trust the investment house of God. The dividends of God's righteousness are the only earthly investments that are guaranteed. All righteousness is right, has been right and will ever be right.

CHAPTER 5

Not All Righteousness is Appreciated

“I’m going to Disneyland!” Like the shout of joy after an important football game, this chant pounded in the hearts of the Christian high school’s senior class. “Dis-ney-land, Dis-ney-land!” They were going to the “Magic Kingdom” and no one was going to rain on their proverbial senior class “parade.”

The senior class trip committee that worked with the class advisor to insure the week was successful had designed seven days of fun, sun, beach and the greatest amusement park in the world. The class was going to

travel from Utah, where they all lived, to journey through Southern California and culminate the week in the so called “Happiest Place on Earth.” Renting vans and staying at churches was the basic plan. Saving as much money as they could by keeping the meal and housing costs down would afford them a more than sufficient amount of money for all the joys of the house that Walt built. They would be able to see the beaches of Southern California, playing sand volleyball, surfing and just lying on the beach. The churches that they contacted were all willing to have them spend their nights on the churches’ floors with the only requirements being the church cleanliness after their stay and a sufficient number of chaperones for the class members. It was supposed to be the senior class swan song before the end of their high school experience.

As the class advisor, I was excited for the kids in more than one way. The plan was to go to some of the nicest locations throughout Southern California. Of course, as a native San Diegan, I had no problem at all with the idea of going back to the place where I grew up. I energetically gave myself to the task of advising the committee as to which beach was the safest, coolest (as in best place to hang out) and most open to multiple activities. Growing up as a surfer added to the excitement of the class as

many of the students asked if I could teach them how to surf. I had no problem with that request either, since Salt Lake has a lot of things to offer in the way of outdoor activities, but it has no ocean or waves. I would enjoy the activity because I would get to do something I really liked. I truly was looking forward to the trip as much as they were.

I was also excited for the kids, because this trip would allow the kids to see a different side of their advisor and teacher. I began my Christian ministry in Southern California. I was a staff member with Campus Crusade for Christ in their athletic ministry, Athletes in Action. I played soccer for their soccer team for two years before I went on staff as a Youth Director for a Baptist church in Orange County. I served in that church for just over nine years, living in the church's parsonage and serving the Lord and His people as their associate pastor. It was in that house where two of my children were born, delivered by their father's own hands, and where every night in the summer we would go into the church, go to the second floor and watch the fireworks lifting off just east of the church from the famed Disneyland. It was for me like going home and I was going to be able to share that with this class that I had grown to love.

Sometime before the trip took place, a movement of discontent began in the perspectives of many people of faith in the United States relative to the Disney trademark. Many were upset at a trend that was occurring in the Disney Corporation in general and Disneyland specifically. The problem was one of a moral position that Disneyland had taken with which many believers felt they could not agree nor support with their money. The company's position upset many who believed the founder of Disneyland, Walt Disney, would not have supported. Specifically, Southern Baptist leaders, among other Christian leaders, encouraged their members to boycott Disney products and Disneyland itself because of this stance.

As we began to finalize the plans for the trip, one of the students came to me and wanted to talk. The subject of the conversation at first caught me off guard. This student was concerned, because she believed it would be wrong for her to participate in the trip to Disneyland. She was supporting the boycott of Disney in obedience to her parents and did not want to go there. I was able to clearly identify in the student her real conviction that this would be wrong for her and at the same time understand her reticence in sharing this. She knew that this would

become a problem with her fellow classmates and that some might not understand.

I must confess that I did not have the same conviction concerning the solution to the problem. Or at least I felt that a boycott was not the way to change the policy of a corporation as large as Disney, even though I disagreed with their policy. I also knew, as the Bible teacher for the high school, that here was an opportunity to put our belief and faith in action for the whole class. I was reminded of the passage in Romans 14 that says quite clearly “not put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother’s way.” If a brother or a sister in Christ has a problem with something, then it is our responsibility to be sensitive to that. The passage continues in saying, “Do not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as evil.”

This student was as important a member of the senior class as any other member of the class. I knew that as believers in Christ and followers of His word we had a choice to make. Was our fun more important than our sister’s stand against going to Disneyland? Should she stay at home and we go anyway, even without her? Should we take her and when we went to Disneyland just leave her at the church by herself all day? Should we consider the bigger spiritual picture and choose to bless our sister by not going to Disneyland at all? Should we

seek an alternative that would bless our sister and bless our God?

I brought it to a meeting of the whole senior class. I knew that they would have to hear the Biblical background, the one student's conviction and the choice that the class had to make for righteousness' sake. They were not happy. In fact, they were really angry that to them one person was dictating to the whole class what should be done. I explained to them that as believers we are connected to one another and the choices we make personally affect the whole group. I explained that our service to Christ does not stop when we are about to have fun. That fun does not trump doing what is right based on God's word. I read the appropriate passages to them from the Bible and let them decide.

Amazingly the group decided not to go to Disneyland so that one of their class would not be left out of anything during their long awaited senior trip. The female student was certainly relieved and at the same time still concerned. Some of the students were very open about not agreeing with the principle outlined to them from God's word. These students acknowledged the clear message of God that our liberty in Christ must never be used to the detriment of any brother or sister. However, they could not get over the spiritual truth and its clash

with their own desires. They wanted Disneyland over the sensibilities of one of their classmates. For that one moment they wanted Mickey over the Messiah, fun over faith, selfishness over spiritual sensitivity and rebellion over righteousness.

Sometimes the doing of righteousness is not appreciated. Perhaps this observation is even more disconcerting when it is seen in the confines of the Christian church or its extended branches. The kids from the Christian school were obviously disappointed, but the fact remained that the word of God was direct in commanding them to act in a certain manner. Their anger at the student, and even at their advisor, was out of line with God's desire for the situation. Their decision to forgo the trip to Disneyland and replace that part of the week with something else was commendable. I am convinced it was an awesome opportunity for God's will to be played out in a real situation. This was not a hypothetical Bible class assignment; this was living the Christian life, not talking about living it.

This should surprise those of us who claim the name of Jesus Christ. The doing of righteousness should be the norm for the Christian experience. God gave us His Son so that we might not remain in the not right, but move into the all right. Romans chapter 6 encourages

us to present ourselves as instruments of righteousness rather than those of unrighteousness. It is the character of faith to do things God's way but the dynamic of our experience here on earth is truly something to consider. We are constantly bombarded with the other side of the story at every corner of life. As believers, we hear the world's message of doing things our own way over and against any way God would have it. Those kids in 1997 were no different. Most knew what they should do, but Disneyland was at least minimally shooting off all its fireworks to get their attention and persuade them to choose fun.

What should not surprise us is the unbelieving world's reaction to righteousness. The scriptures ask us the rhetorical question of what light has to do with darkness. The answer is palpable. It has nothing to do with the darkness. Again, as I have already said, we are, to a certain degree, weirdoes on the planet. We march to the beat of a different drummer and the beat that He is laying down is the very heartbeat of all creation. We are not our own. We were bought with a price. We belong to the King of all things and we are changed and are being changed into His desired image for us. We no longer belong to the world, its system or its power. Though we

live in the world, we are to be that light shining into the darkness.

There is no way for the world to really value the calling to right living that we carry. Those who do not know God cannot understand what agenda we in actuality are trying to live out. In fact, they may not have the moral parameters to make an accurate appraisal of Christ-like living. We will seem dimwitted to them, short-sighted and like “holy rollers.” The heart of a loving God reaching out to mankind through His sacrificial giving of Jesus does not compute to the average non-believer. It seems ludicrous to the world that we should care to share the truth about God’s love the way we do. They, generally speaking, don’t care. On top of it all, they often find us stupid to follow such a path.

It should, therefore, come as no surprise at all when the world questions our acts of righteousness. Nonetheless we are surprised and our surprise assaults us. We cannot believe that the world doesn’t see our good work for them. We are upset when they don’t take as valuable our efforts to make our culture good. We, in shock, look at one another and shake our heads. We exclaim, “How can they not see we are trying to love them?” If we are going to be doers of good, we must come to a resolution of this conflict.

I have come to the realization that those outside of a saving understanding of Christ hate what they don't understand. Jesus told His disciples to not be surprised by this. He said to them, "If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you" (John 15:18-19). In Christ Jesus we live outside of the power of the world and in the power of the Son. What the world cannot understand, for it does not know Him that way, we not only understand, but become targets of the misunderstanding and hatred of the world. It cannot truly appreciate what we have become or what we are about in living godly, righteous and distinctive lives.

The word goes on to say that those who are righteous and practice the same are at times plotted against. Psalm 37:12 says that the wicked actually makes plans against the righteous person and "gnashes at him with his teeth." Some would even try to slay the righteous. Verse 32 of the same Psalm says that the wicked "seeks to kill" the righteous. What the righteous does and who he is runs contrary to the world's norm. Paul, in the book of Acts, experienced this opposition when the magician and false prophet, Elymas (also known as Bar-Jesus), openly went

up against him in trying to disrupt his preaching and causing the Roman proconsul, Sergius Paulus, to “turn away from the faith.” The world would, if it could, nullify the message of righteousness.

1865 was a watershed year for the United States of America. The country found itself in the last throes of the Civil War. The nation was heading into a significant change for both the North and the South. On March 4 of that year, Abraham Lincoln, the beleaguered, oft maligned, but steadfast president, offered his famous second inaugural address. In the speech, the president, who was known for his great resolve and compassion, spoke words that reflected his deep conviction in God's providence. He said in concluding the message, “With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.”⁶ Plainly Lincoln was making a statement about the greater nation, both North and South. He was quite aware of the human loss that this nation had endured and was convinced that as a nation we needed to seek a righteous termination to the conflict. Healing

the consequential scars of such a disastrous fight was his goal. Simply, he was encouraging the nation to do the right thing.

Strangely enough, even after such an incredible loss of life, property and infrastructure that the war had given the nation, Lincoln's righteous proposal for healing was not esteemed by many. Just a few days more than one month after his address, he was assassinated. Murdered while attending an event that should have been a joy, his presence at the play in Ford's Theater became a national tragedy. His words may have sounded hollow at that point, but his fervor in doing what was right is undeniable. "Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away."⁷ Lincoln was willing to do the right, as he was given to see that right, whether it was appreciated or not.

We must come to an unrelenting knowledge that our world will never understand the work of love, hope, faith or righteousness without a touch from God. They may only appreciate a shadow of the fullness of God's love and purposes on the earth. We must not be surprised, at any level, if we are not accepted for the good that we do or purpose. The way that things work in the world tends to nullify the good of God and that realization should not deter us from the doing of good. In understanding

that ambiance we will serve God more realistically and perhaps more sensitively toward the world's deficiency in this area.

Though the response of our culture may distress us, knowing the world's propensity for this attitude will help us be more understanding and more effective in what we purpose under God's leadership. Not all righteousness will be admired within or out of the church, but our mandate is to continue in that right for the world's sake and our obedience to God. That senior class exemplified, at least by their actions, the goal that the Lord Jesus Christ has for every believer. We must exercise our faith and His righteousness with the knowledge that the culture around us may not get it. However, this culture clash should never stop us if we are to be pleasing to God.

CHAPTER 6

Confronting the “Who” I am

I am in love with myself. Seriously, I really love myself! Without a doubt, I really care about my well being, future and current stability. I want to feel good, look good, talk intelligently, be appreciated by others and exercise my own will for the benefit of myself (and if that helps others, it is a bonus). I would hug myself more often if I could justify it before the world. I love myself!

At the same time, I hate myself. What a weird predicament! I hate my selfishness, my egocentric musings, my fixation with mirrors, my simmering pot of sin (my body) and the thoughts and actions that

demonstrate my absolute disdain for those around me. I hate the constant drumming of my heart, pounding, “Me, me, me.” I hate myself! And I am not alone.

In fifty-some-odd years, I have come to the realization that all of us humans love and hate ourselves. We may not publicize it, we may not own up to it, even privately, but we all love and hate ourselves at some level. If we could be honest with ourselves for even a nanosecond, we would succumb to the truth of our self love and deprecation. What a quandary!

This tension brought me to Jesus Christ. I did not want to fess up to the truth that I was so two faced. Really, knowing we are so duplicitous is a shock. We act so convincingly and decided sometimes, yet we are not.

I will never forget my friend, Tom Jackson, confronting me with the truth about Jesus. Tom and I were members of a 70s progressive rock band. Our band played music similar to the style of *Yes*, *Jethro Tull* and other “prog-rock” bands of the time. Tom was the bass player for the band and I was the singer. He was a couple of years older than I was, but most of the band members were more or less about the same age. I joined the band in 1976 and Tom and I became good friends through that experience.

The band had become somewhat popular in San Diego. When I joined, they had already had several successful concerts. We wrote and performed our own music and had quite a significant following at the time. My first concert with the group was at the Balboa Bowl in San Diego's Balboa Park, in front of about 5,000 people. We practiced at least 5 days a week, usually from about 6:00 or 7:00 p.m. to 1:00 or 2:00 a.m. in the morning. We rented a studio in which to practice and left our significant amount of equipment setup in the studio until we had a concert. We were very committed to the music and the prospect of becoming more than just a regionally popular group.

During the many nights of practice and the breaks before and after, Tom and I would talk about the things that were important to our lives. During those times, Tom began to tell me about his relationship with Jesus Christ. He shared that Christ was the perfect man, without sin, absolutely clean in a world that was anything but clean. He told me that this one was not only the perfect man, but God in the flesh. He said that Jesus was the very epitome of love. He was a real lover in that He loved that dirty world even above Himself. In fact, He loved that world so much that He died as a payment for the whole world's filthy, duplicitous, quandary laden self and

demonstrated His continued love by rising from the dead to live and intercede for that world forevermore.

Tom explained that Jesus was our way out of the mess in which we live. Jesus, according to my friend, was willing and able to love me as I was, so that I could become through Him what I could never become by myself. I heard what he was saying to me and I didn't believe him! I went into John self love mode and got arrogant and "intelligent" and told him he was wrong! Fortunately, he didn't turn me off or "shake the dust off of his shoes." He just smiled and said, "It's okay, don't believe me, but why don't you check out what the Bible says about this and prove me wrong?"

Like I have already said, I love and hate myself. When he told me that, I was completely caught off guard and struggled again with my dualistic self. In my heart I realized my inner turmoil. The part that loved me didn't need a savior; the part that hated me, desperately longed for one.

"Okay," I said. "But I'll prove you wrong." So I began to read the Bible. In my family it was a book revered, but never read. Because of that, I had an appreciation for the Bible as a book with some worth, even if it was only as a decoration on the coffee table. I read it with proofs flying through my mind to quell the challenge of

my friend. I read at first with detached interest in the content, only looking for the fallacies that I thought were within its pages, but I finished reading, devouring the truths that leapt out of those pages and into my heart.

I could not prove him wrong. In fact, the message of that book made me so uncomfortable that I had to confront the internal battle within my heart that I loved and hated myself and could do nothing about it in my own power. The war within me would never cease until I fessed up to the reality that I was impotent to change my own natural being. I could put up as much window dressing as I liked, but the truth remained. I realized that only Jesus could save me from this predicament in my life. I was a sinner. I was a sinner and unable to change that status by myself. I was a disobedient creation of God whose only desire was self. My end, in that state, was complete and utter separation from the savior I actually needed to effect any real change in John Prim.

At 3:00 a.m., early in the summer of 1977, Tom asked me what was keeping me from accepting Jesus as my Lord and Savior. I knew what he was asking me this time. I knew, because I had seen it over and over in the Bible that I was reading. I was being asked to give myself away to that Jesus who had died on the cross and rose from the dead to liberate me from the penalty of my

diseased self. I knew that Christ had a demand on me to decide and in that moment and I knew what was keeping me from doing it right then and there. My only response was that I, myself, was in the way.

Tom then said the fateful words, “Then get out of the way!”

I knew he was right, as I stood there looking him in the eyes, but in those five minutes that elapsed I was battered by every excuse known to man being hurled at me by the fear that was cowering in my flesh that was about to change. No words can truly captivate the emotional, spiritual and even physical distress I was under in that moment. I felt like I was about to die, yet I knew I was on the verge of something miraculous. I heard a little voice in my head saying, “You’ll lose everything you’ve attained so far. You’ll become a holy-roller. Your girlfriend will dump you. You’ll have no more fun!” It was all self, self, self. In silence he stood there watching me, waiting for my response. I had no real excuse, but the preservation of my old selfish ways. I said with nothing more than a whisper, “Okay, Tom.” Tom said, “That’s great, John.” He asked me to pray with him right then, in the parking garage of the studio. I honestly don’t remember the words that I said in that moment. I just followed the lead of my friend as I repeated the phrases he gave me to say. I knew

what I was doing and I knew that my heart was open and honest before the Savior of my soul. I asked the living Lord Jesus to come and live in me, confessing my sin to Him, asking His forgiveness and I moved myself out of the way, making room for Him in my life forever.

Now that is a beautiful story, true as true can be, but I encountered a real problem after this experience. I found that I was still in this same old body that wanted to do the same old things for the same old purposes of serving the same old SELF! Romans 7:24 screamed into my ears, "Wretched man that I am." I still loved and hated myself, albeit with a new perspective on my life with Christ. How could this be? Not only how could this be, but what am I going to do now?

As I have already mentioned, I am now over half a century old. I am officially an old guy. In fact, I have received my AARP mailing numerous times, begging me to enroll and receive all the benefits that one such as myself has obtained through the attainment of long life. I have not responded, as yet, in case my response might validate the reality. But as with almost all old guys, I have acquired a view of life that has helped me to confront the challenges of life. This view is validated by an intimate personal experience, observation and trust in others' experiences, based on the biblical admonitions

and wisdom. What I have discovered is that Jesus did free me from the penalty of my sin, but my experience of that freedom is very dependent on continuing to face myself for what I really am in light of my being stuck in this same old stinky flesh.

As an added attraction to this experience, I find that I am not alone. All Christian people must confront the truth that though God is good, though He truly desires to save, can save and does save, we all are still stuck in that same old stinky flesh. We have no way out of this body until we make the trip to heaven. We are stuck, jammed, inextricably fused into the body that we have and we cannot get out of it.

We may diet, exercise, meditate, buy special products, hope for a miracle and all of it will be for naught. This “body” is, to a certain degree, a curse with which we must deal. We have a common dialectic. Our physical nature compels us to confront the truth that though our eventual home after coming to know Jesus may be heaven; in the meantime, we trudge through this life in a carcass that would lead us to shallow results and an unfulfilled life. This body and the satisfaction that it craves are desires, thirsts, and hungers of emptiness, never to be filled. This body is a ravenous vacuum, unable to find satisfaction with what we can provide in our own power. It is

paramount that we take a good look in the mirror and be honest enough to see what is really there.

So our biggest test is to face this reality with the truth: The truth that says there is a right and a wrong. The truth that says there is a way out of the mess: God's way. The truth that says doing what is right is more important than feeling good. The truth that says that truth prevails over feelings. The truth that says that the beast of our flesh can only be tamed by faith, focused on Christ, while giving away our earthly struggle to the same Savior who provided eternal life. In almost 30 years of Christian ministry, I have observed that most people (Christian or not) do not want to do that. Most want to find a magic bullet, an alternative out. Most, if given the choice between feeling good by doing what is wrong or doing what is right no matter the consequence, will choose the former.

It is my conviction, based on God's word and my observation, that those who tend to have victory over this quandary are those who confront it with a real appreciation for who they are in the flesh and who they are in Christ. In this body that I have, with all the equipment it affords me, I have to come to the determination that without Christ I am nothing. Truly, if I am relying on my earthly essence to get me through, I am bankrupt. Romans 3

simplifies this idea when it says, “There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; all have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one.” This is our state outside of the grace of God. Without the help of Jesus, this is what our body, our psyche, our mental capacity and our selves can bring to the equation: Nothing! This is why John Prim in 1977 had to get his self out of the way to let Christ come in.

On the other hand, because of who I am, I have also come to know the grace of God. I did ask Jesus to come in to my life and take up residence. I asked Him to abide in me, and as much as I have learned since then about that whole process, I could have never known how absolutely profound that moment was for me. He did come into my life. He did change me in ways that I never would have thought possible. He did give me a future with Him for eternity. He did give me a way to live that rose above the typical way of the world and the conditioning of my flesh.

Often I reflect on the truths of God as they crash into the void of my power and earthly wisdom. I love to write poetry and recently wrote a poem about this tension and the implication for the only way out of the mess.

The Course of All My Doubt.

Wretched, broken, deplorable
Painted into the corner
Of the flesh in which I reside.
It is the course of all my doubt.

Who will save me?
Oh, who will save me?
Yes, who will save me
From this body of death?

Damaged, pained, miserable
Resigned to live the life
Of struggle one day at a time.
It is the course of all my doubt.

Who will save me?
Oh, who will save me?
Yes, who will save me
From this body of death?

Downcast, joyless, damnable
Chained to the carcass
Of this world of suffering.
It is the course of all my doubt.

Who will save me?
Oh, who will save me?
Yes, who will save me
From this body of death?

Wicked, worthless, despicable
Filled with the contents
Of all that is vile and common.
It is the course of all my doubt.

Who will save me?
Oh, who will save me?
Yes, who will save me
From this body of death?

Pathetic, hapless, pitiable
Grounded by the dirt
Of our existence without God.
It is the course of all my doubt.

Who will save me?
Oh, who will save me?
Yes, who will save me
From this body of death?

The answer, of course, is the answer of the passage alluded to in Romans 7. The answer is a thankful, given, open, submitted heart to Jesus Christ.

So I could now at least deal with the flesh that I was in. I had been given a capacity to confront the “who” I was in the flesh with the “who” I had become in Jesus Christ. Where I had been lost to do whatever my desires had dictated to me before, I now had been given the power to have victory over the recurring things of my fleshly life. Although I might resonate with Paul’s cry of seeming desperation in the flesh, I, like him, can affirm the truth in thanksgiving to God through Jesus Christ (see Romans 7:25). I have an advocate, a friend, a helper, a Savior in Christ who enables me.

Paul gives us the godly advice to practice a form of bodily training that will help us with this ever present tension. He learned in 1 Corinthians 9:27 to “...buffet [his] body and make it [his] slave...” What this implies is a game plan, a direction in confronting ourselves before the moment of weakness arrives and in the midst of it. He states in the same passage that this is his “aim.” He has a purpose in practicing this form of personal training and that is to win spiritually in the game of life. What this acknowledges is the frailty of our flesh and the high calling to which we have been called. This will lead to

an ongoing practice of trusting God enough to defer to His power, presence and purpose even in our bodies. No matter the circumstance, our trust in God's ability to help us in the middle of whatever we are facing is critical.

It is amazing to me that we have no trouble trusting ourselves when we have no power to effect any real change and tons of trouble trusting God when we are given the only way out through God by trusting Him, the Almighty. 1 Corinthians 10:13 states, "No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, that you may be able to endure it." What it comes down to is trust: Trust in God's power over any power we might bring to the table; trust in God over any of our feelings, fears or frailties. My wife calls this the exercise of our spiritual "muscle of trust." I know that this is not a real muscle, but the imagery works wonderfully.

This "muscle" is built, trained and maintained by constant and ever increasing intentional use. It is made by trusting God, experience by experience. It does not deny the truth of our physical state, but puts it up against the overriding truth that "God is faithful." He is

trustworthy. He will come alongside of us and make a difference in our lives.

As a former athlete, I know the pain and struggle of getting into shape for the season. Whatever the sport, there is a beginning point where the athlete's condition is not yet at game strength or performance level. The athlete may have all the physical and mental characteristics for excellence, but the body must be trained to perform at the level required. This is an arduous task, one that requires a consistent focus and commitment to the end goal. It takes time, consistent energy, sport specific exercise and the faith that there is an achievable goal. One must trust the trainer and the regimen to be a success.

When I was a missionary in Uruguay, I had the opportunity to play on a Uruguayan soccer team. My team, Club Atlético Juventud de Colonia, was in the first division of the interior of Uruguay. Most of the players on my team received salaries for playing. I, of course, did not receive a salary of any sort because of my religious visa to the country. I will never forget the first few days of preseason training for the team. Our team's stadium was located right across the street from cliffs that looked over the beach where the River Plate ran. I remember the trainer of the club taking us across the street to the cliffs, and the road that ran alongside them, and saying,

“Corramos!” In Spanish that means “let’s run.” Of course the natural question was where and how far. To that he would respond by pointing his hand down the road that was 5 kilometers long and saying, “Corramos!” We of course would ask again, having received the answer to where we were to run, with how far. He would patiently reply while pointing to the road, “Corramos!” We got the message. We did not know how far we were going to have to run, only that we had a direction. As we would take off down the road, our trainer would hop on a motorcycle and keep pace with us down the road. We never knew how far we were to run until he told us, but he was always there next to us on that motorcycle, watching us, ready for the moment of those magic words, “Volvamos!” Let’s return.

We all in our earthly bodies have the same setup. The Heavenly Trainer is pointing the direction for us. He tells us to “deny ourselves” and “follow” Him. He does not tell us how far it is, but He ask us to trust Him and to run “with patience the race” which is called our lives. He does not tell us how far it is, but He promises to be with us, right alongside of us. He does not tell us how far it is, but He tells us He will give us the strength to make it. He does not tell us how far it is, but encourages us all the while even though it may be ever so hard. He does

not tell us how far it is, but He reminds us of who we are without Him, so we might have victory as we submit to Him and Him alone.

The confrontation of who we are within ourselves is the foundation for an honest, open, and potentially powerful stance as we travel this earthly life. If we do not make this happen, as we face ourselves in the proverbial mirror, we will never have a victorious attitude, nor will we have any victory over our circumstances. It may be very uncomfortable to exercise our faith in this manner, but the results are promised to be beyond our imagination.

“Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God,” Hebrews 12:1-2.

CHAPTER 7

Dealing with Disappointment

“We see no hope for you graduating from this institution.” So read the critical line of the certified letter I had just opened from the university I was attending. At that particular point in my life, I was a senior at the university. My major was physics and I was a teaching assistant for a section of freshman physics since my junior year for one of my professors. I also worked part-time as a lab assistant for a cardiovascular surgery lab in the medical school of my university, a job that I had since my freshman year at the school. I was considering medicine as one of my options for my future. I was on

the school's soccer team and was receiving a full grant to get my education at that school. The letter went on to say that because they saw no hope for my arriving at cap and gown day, they were terminating my student status indefinitely. Indefinitely!

In one opening of a letter my future as a university educated person became very doubtful. I was extremely disappointed. In fact, words were not sufficient to describe my discontent and regret. I could just imagine all the people in my life who, at that very moment, could say to me how discouraged this information made them. I could hear my mom. "Sweetheart, what have you done?" I could hear my dad. "What in the Sam Hill has got into you, boy?" I could hear my grandparents from my mother's side speaking to me with only their looks of unbelieving sadness for me. I didn't want to imagine what my grandma from my dad's side would say. I could hear all my friends at school in incredulity encouraging me to fight this most unjust decision from the administration. In all of the voices, the one voice I heard the most was my own: The voice that spoke to me when I loved myself and the one that yelled at me when I hated myself. Right at that instant, the voice in my head was yelling at me.

My disappointment was self-inflicted. Sure I had all the equipment, if you will, for a very successful university experience, but I really never applied myself. I played at school when I should have given myself to it. I never gave myself a real chance, even with all the blessings that I had been given for success. Not only had I disappointed every member of my family (I was the very first grandchild to go to college), but I had arrived at this most discouraged state quite honestly. I looked at myself with the only realization possible. I had “shot myself in the foot” and no one else could be blamed.

My disappointment took another turn which even surprised me. I woke up one morning a few days after receiving the letter with an incredible pain in my left side and back. I tried to shrug it off as an anomaly from the previous day's soccer game, perhaps a bruise to my body from the normal jostling of a competitive match but it wasn't that at all. After complaining about the pain in my side all day, I decided to go to the emergency room and see what was going on.

After waiting the prescribed amount of time in the waiting room, I was finally given an examination room. The doctor entered the room and asked me the typical questions of name, age, height, weight, any previous pain, and the key question, “What seems to be the

problem today?” I told him about the pain in my side and back. He took his stethoscope, listened to my chest and, I supposed, my heart. He asked me again, how old I was. I told him, “21.” He said, “I’ll be right back.”

A few minutes later, he returned with another doctor. This doctor introduced himself and said, “Let’s have a look again, ok?” He proceeded to listen to my chest again. Then he turned to the first doctor and said, “I think you’re right.” At this point they both left and returned with a nurse. I was beginning to gather a sizable following from the medical staff about then, so I asked what was going on. The first doctor told me that they were admitting me right then to the Medical ICU. I was shocked at this report and immediately asked them why. The second doctor explained that they had determined that I had all the symptoms of pericarditis. This malady is the inflammation of the pericardium (the tissue that surrounds the heart). It’s most common form is acute pericarditis which has a number of causes, one of which is viral in nature. It can kill you.

They began to prepare me for my transport to the ICU. I was given a gown to change into, then, was encouraged to supply them with enough blood to make a vampire quite happy. After the blood samples were taken, the nurse told me to sit in the wheel chair she had

just brought in to the exam room and I was wheeled off to my room in ICU where I was to stay for the next 7 days.

I was as low emotionally as I thought anyone could be. I had just been booted out of school, lost my jobs, and whatever my future was going to be, was clearly in great peril. Not only was school problematic at that point, but my very life was, at least on paper, tenuous to say the least. Disappointment was not the word. Sheer terror for my future gripped me completely.

What are we to do when the pillars of our lives, or the supposed pillars of our lives, come tumbling down? How do we confront the earthly disappointments that are presented to us? If we have such a great God, why do we have to have those setbacks? How should we look at those setbacks in light of the big picture?

One thing that I could not have known as I lay in my hospital bed those 33 years ago, was the Lord was using that disappointing set of circumstances to move me toward Him and His most wonderful saving grace. That sickness started me on a journey that led me eventually to become friends with Tom Jackson and to the hearing of the good news about Jesus Christ. That supposed setback was the very jump off spot for my salvation.

As I look back on that time of my life, I realize that without Jesus Christ all of us are without hope and truly sick unto death. We are, in our natural state, without the ability to realistically make a future that is eternal or abundant. Our hopes and dreams are all dependent on what we can muster personally and most of the time it isn't even enough to accomplish the simple goals we may have. My life up to that moment was all about me, as I have already explained. God could not fit into my life because I would not acknowledge His right over me.

The road to dealing with disappointment in life as a Christian is to first settle the argument of self versus God. As I have already said, the mirror is an awesome tool for getting it right with God and resolving what is the real foundation for our lives. We must arrive at the place where we not only acknowledge God's right over us verbally, but in every expressed area of our lives, growing, as we will, into an ever increasing level of trust in Him.

God is not God because we say so. God is not God because we act so. God is God because He is and it doesn't depend on us at all! Again, He is trustworthy, because He is the foundation for all things.

Just like pain, disappointment is everywhere. Christians likewise experience the let down of disappointments exactly like everyone else. We are not

immune from the distress of things not going how we would like them to go. As we plan, we can be assured that not all will come off the drawing board as drawn. The affirmation of believers who have finally gotten the God versus us thing down gives them a foundation for dealing with the common case of disappointment.

When I counsel people in my ministry, the very first thing that I must deal with is the issue of God's trustworthy nature in the midst of their problem. I often ask in marriage counseling, for instance, if the couple believes that God is able to heal and restore what is lacking in their marriage. I hear often the response and complete affirmation that indeed God is able, but they are not so sure about the other side of the spousal arrangement. The real problem is they don't believe God is able, for if He were able, then there would be no situation or person that would be beyond His reach to change or better. I am reminded of the verse where Jesus is talking about salvation and how difficult it is, in particular, for a rich man. He said, "The things impossible for men are possible with God" (Luke 18:27). What seems insurmountable for us in our humanity is nothing to God.

The second thing I share with people in counseling through a tough situation is to ask them if they knew

that God was with them and that He had clearly given a word on the situation, would they do what the word says. Here faith and sight collide with sparks and incredible noise. Most people say that they would of course follow the scriptural mandate, command or spiritual advice. They believe in God; they believe what He says. The problem here is they usually are shocked to find out what God's word ACTUALLY SAYS! What is evident is that there is a great lack of understanding or misunderstanding concerning God's word and what it says.

Are we really open to the love that God demands us express to the world around us or is this only to be carried out on Sundays at church? What about giving and kindness and all the other uncomfortable Christian character traits that anyone is able to discern in God's word? How are we supposed to let them have the "shotgun" of God's love, when everything in our human flesh wants to give them both barrels of what we think about them or the situation? We confront the scene of our disappointment and we only want to scream.

It is in this tension of knowing our good God, His good word and our known vacillation in living it where our disappointment can be overcome. A Bible

verse that has come to mean quite a lot to me in the last 20 years encourages us to humble ourselves before the Almighty and give to Him all our cares. The key in this process is that in giving Him all our cares we are identifying who the real caregiver is. 1 Peter 5:6-7 says, "Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your anxiety upon Him, because He cares for you." God, the One that every believer hangs onto as being able to do it all, really cares for us in our efforts to do the right. He cares so much that even in our disappointment and anxiety, He commends us to give it all away to Him, for He is ever mindful of us.

So what happens when we do try to convey the right kind of living and we fail at some point? We know God is able. We know His word is right. We know that we must submit and live it out. What happens when we deviate from the good road off on to the more human road and crash into the ever present way everyone else does it? What if our humanity leaks out of our godly intent? What happens if the end result is that we finally face the flaming failure of our faith and disappointment in ourselves, in our walk and maybe in our God? What if we see those who we have lifted up to undue positions of glory make a mistake and fall

off their perch? What if we pray and pray and pray and nothing happens according to our prayer? Is God big enough for our disappointing actions, attitudes or chagrin at not getting what we asked for?

I have come to know God as the great change agent. I know this not only through what I see in scripture, but also through what I have come to see in my life. The young man that I was 33 years ago did not have a clue about what God was about. Yet even in the disappointment of my college life and my following medical wakeup call, God was at work. He used all those events to propel me toward that parking garage where Tom Jackson shared the challenge with me to accept Christ as Lord and Savior. He used all those events to challenge me to read His word where I learned more about Him and fell in love with the scriptures. He used all those unsatisfactory events at the human level to begin the molding process in my life where I went back to school and graduated with some distinctions. I was never a lost cause! Yet I was still a cause: God's cause.

There is a concept used in the Bible, most often in the New Testament. It is seen in the words "trials, testings or temptations." In the original language of the New Testament, Greek, these three ideas are

captured by only one word. The Greek word *peirasmos* encapsulates all of the above meanings depending on the context of its usage. The more prevalent idea for this word is the testing of something to prove its worth. Only in negative contexts where something or someone is trying to defraud someone from the greater good is there the idea of tempting or temptation. In the primary connotation of proving someone or something is found the inherent desire for the person's betterment by the one testing them.

God, who is Holy and Righteous does not test His children to see them fail, rather He tests them to validate their worth. God uses the negatives of life to give those under His care the opportunity to see who they really are in Him. The fiery ordeals or momentary failures that we experience are all about apprehending Him more clearly and revealing Him in power. Even if we self destruct in our day to day living, the opportunity to get it right is still ours through the One who abides with us.

One of my favorite verses, and a funny one at that, is Ecclesiastes 9:4. It says, "For whoever is joined with all the living, there is hope; surely a live dog is better than a dead lion." In comparison, the natural attributes of a lion supersede all the attributes of a dog.

In fact, in a one to one assessment, the lion comes out on top in every area except for the ability to re-eat that which it has already eaten once and fetching our papers in the morning. A dead lion is only about lying around decomposing, while the dog who is still about barking, running, wagging his tail and licking your face has a future.

Though we may consider our momentary setbacks as disastrous and limiting our future, we are still alive and as God's children we still have hope. In the midst of trials and testing, whether they are self-inflicted or not, we have hope. Our great God remains close, available and able to get us through the proverbial night of our experience. Our job in the mix is to find Him in that whirlwind and submit to His good, no matter what we think, feel or determine by ourselves. If God is not God when our world blows up, He is not God at all.

What about the bigger picture? How do we deal with our disappointments if God is using us for a greater good? What if we see no personal good come of our submitting to God's will in any given area?

I have often wondered how the early Christian church was able to continue on in spite of the persecution they experienced. If we only use the

accounts of their maltreatment that are Biblical, we surely are astounded by their resiliency. The Apostle Paul, for instance, states in 2 Corinthians 11:23-31 his testimony of personal suffering for God's greater good. He says,

[I have suffered] in far more labors, in far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death. Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine *lashes*. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. *I have been* on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from *my* countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; *I have been* in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. Apart from *such* external things, there is the daily pressure upon me *of* concern for all the churches. Who is weak without my being weak? Who is led into sin without my intense concern? If I have to boast, I will boast of what pertains to my weakness. The God and Father of the

Lord Jesus, He who is blessed forever,
knows that I am not lying.

I would have given up the ghost if I would have seen this list of seemingly negative results for my faithful living, but Paul boasted in these things because he saw the big picture. God was at work through the apostle and that work superseded all other considerations. In the grand scheme of things godly, our setbacks for God are really blessings for a future that He knows more about than we could ever dream.

In confronting our disappointments, no matter how major they may seem to us, we must let God be God and continue to persevere in His goodness. The attitude of consistent submission to His prescribed will, can and will have eternal consequences. The little things we endure today may be the very lynch pins for a future blessing that only God may know.

Shawn Young was a high school student when I first met him. I lived near the high school he attended. Shawn was a member of the school's soccer team and great player of the "beautiful game." I volunteered one year to help the coach of the soccer team. I had two reasons for my desire to help. One was my love for the game of soccer and the opportunity to teach others and impart that

same love. The other was my conviction that, to share the gospel, we Christians needed to place ourselves into the world, rather than sitting back and waiting for the world to come to us.

The coach, who later became a good friend of mine, was in the locker room when I first asked him if I could help. At that point in my life, I had played varsity high school soccer, intercollegiate soccer, club soccer and had three professional soccer tryouts. I was at least somewhat experienced in the game. When I asked the coach if I could help him, my idea was to be his assistant coach, helping him plan strategies, choose players and make all the other coaching type decisions. The coach responded to me by saying, "Sure, if you want to bring the nets and the balls out to the field, that would be great. And if you could set the nets up and shag balls during practice, that would really help."

I was totally taken back by his response. I was thinking glory and what I got was menial. I just stood there. I didn't know what to say. I can't remember if I knew it right then or not, but I said okay to coach Dan, because I knew God wanted me to be in that place of service, no matter what I imagined that to be. My initial disappointment didn't stop me from doing what God wanted me to do.

I met Shawn through that experience. He was a great soccer player and I could see that he had a real future in the game. Shawn and I developed a great relationship as friends and I was given an opportunity some time later to share the truth about Jesus with him. His response at first was that the church was full of hypocrites. I actually agreed with him, but said that was the reason we needed a savior. I challenged Shawn to not take what I said for granted, but to look in the Bible himself and see if what I said to him was true. He came back to me the next day and said he wanted to receive Jesus as his Lord and Savior. That seems like a nice Christian story with the fantastic conclusion of another soul in God's family, but that was not the end.

Shawn went to college, at first, with a scholarship to play soccer. I was very proud of him. One day, he called and told me he was giving up his scholarship and transferring colleges to be closer to his family. He told me he was worried about them, since they were not believers, and wanted to be able to share the good news about Christ with those he loved. So he moved to a new city and school, got involved in campus ministry and later even became the campus minister for the university in which he had attended. Shawn was able in the nearly 20 years of campus ministry to share the

gospel with hundreds if not thousands of students, not to mention his family. Today he is a strategist for the same international campus ministry in starting new campus Christian groups. The bigger picture could have been curtailed by my unwillingness to serve in humility before a disappointment in position on the high school's soccer team. The cause of Christ would have been diminished through my part, if I had not continued to do what I knew was the right thing.

Learning to deal with our setbacks will help us see the Lord behind it all. Doing the good things of God, despite our evaluation of our circumstance, honors Him and gives us opportunity to see His hand at work in and through us, either by sight or by faith.

CHAPTER 8

What Really Matters?

It all began with the fork. I was working as a missionary in the country of Uruguay. My specific job assignment was as a church planter for the departments of Colonia and San Jose. In those two departments, which would be similar to our states, I helped to plant two churches, one in the city of San Jose de Mayo, San Jose and the other in the city of Tarariras, Colonia. Like all missionaries, some of my other duties were those that were assigned to me when a fellow missionary might be on furlough. During this particular time I was also assigned the duty of administering the Baptist Farm in

the town of Mercedes which was in a totally different department of Uruguay, Soriano, north of Colonia.

My duties for the farm were to insure that the income and out-flow of monies were kept at a manageable level and that the caretakers, who lived on the farm, were doing what needed to be done. Their wellbeing was also my concern. I was to manage the dairy that was on the farm and also the peach and strawberry crops that were essential for the farm to maintain its primary purpose which was to allow the poor from the outskirts of Mercedes to use plots of land from the farm to grow their own food and to have an opportunity to share the love of Christ with them.

My usual schedule was to visit the farm every other week for two to four days. During my stay I would go over the books with the caretakers and make a general review of how things were going economically, ministerially and personally. Many of my stays were packed with reviewing the milking of the 30 cows and the usefulness of the new milking machine. Sometimes I would negotiate with the local coop for the best prices on milk, peaches or strawberries. Once I even helped in the delivery of a new calf at 3:00 a.m. in the pouring rain. Much of my time working on the farm was humorous, since I had grown up a city boy and knew very little about farming,

milking, animal husbandry or any other farm type work. The other missionaries began to tease me a little by calling me Farmer John.

On one of my trips to the farm I got a lesson on what really matters. The area of northern Uruguay and Argentina had been experiencing some problems with the disease Typhoid. The disease is caused when someone ingests contaminated food or water. The contamination is bacterial in nature and is caused by food or water being contaminated by fecal material. Those of us who were working in some of the areas that were close to the infected area were trying our best to be careful with what we ate and what we drank.

Like country folk everywhere, the Uruguayan family that worked the farm and ministered to the community around them were humble, honest people. They had a wonderful love for the Lord and a commitment to the work on the farm with the missionary agronomist with whom they worked. Like most farming areas around the world, the midday meal was the largest and the caretaker family was no exception. Everyone came to the table for the noon meal and it was the most formal meal for this family.

One of the customs that I had to get used to during my stay in Uruguay was the oft times lack of use of

napkins at a meal. We in the U.S.A. are used to either a paper napkin provided for a meal and even a cloth one for some. That was not the case in some places in Uruguay and when they did provide something it was more like wax paper than an absorbent type of napkin. I often joked with my fellow missionaries about having to use my shirtsleeve to wipe my mouth or the wax paper type napkins to smear the grease around my mouth.

One day I was at the farm and all of us came to the table to eat the big meal for the day. The family always extended to me the head of the table as an honored guest and this time was no exception. I sat down at the table with the rest of the family, taking inventory of the setting around me. There was the mom working hard in the kitchen near the wood-burning stove, the dad sitting at the corner spot diagonally from where I was, the kids all around the rest of the table. I looked down at the place setting before me and noticed my fork had something green looking stuck to one of its prongs. I am red-green color deficient, so whether it was green or not is somewhat problematic, but it looked green to me. And there it was on my “unused” fork! I quickly thought of typhoid fever and the new missionary-farmer dead for Jesus. My second thought was where the napkin might be so I could wipe the green thing off my fork. I looked

all over the table for the napkin. Of course, it wasn't there.

I started to panic inside thinking about what I was going to do. Here the family had set out for me a wonderful feast by any standard and what was I going to do, make some comment about the dirty fork? I thought, "I'll wipe it off on my jeans while everyone is praying." So I began to prepare myself for the wipe and clean maneuver while every eye was closed and every head was bowed.

The dad of the house said to me at that moment, "Hermano Juan, qué nos dirijas en oración por favor." Being translated, "Brother John, lead us in prayer please." I was absolutely caught off guard. It was challenging enough to speak in Spanish for day to day things, but prayer took an extra amount of concentration. The reason why was not because I had a bad prayer life, rather it was the nature of praying in Spanish. To offer prayers is typically more difficult, because you have to use the subjunctive in Spanish to really accomplish a properly voiced prayer to God, asking for His provision, giving to Him thanks and asking for His blessing. As my Spanish language teachers had told me, learning to move around comfortably in the subjunctive was one indication of fluency in Spanish. My mind went blank!

I went back into first week Spanish where they taught us to pray by saying “gracias Señor,” then to fill in the blank with as many nouns that you could remember in the language that you were thankful for and tack on the old “In Jesus’ name, amen” at the end. So there I was reciting my beginning Spanish thank you list to God while trying to wipe the dirty fork off on my pant leg. I was hoping all the while that no one would see what I was doing, because I didn’t want to make them feel bad or for me to somehow imply to them that I was above them. I tried to watch them as I prayed and wiped, so they wouldn’t know. This made wiping the fork a little more difficult, but I had confidence in my pant leg and my ability to concentrate on three things at once. When I finally ran out of blanks to fill in, I said, “Amen,” and realized the fork was still carrying its green goo.

Now what was I going to do? I sat there stunned again from my lack of ability in cleaning and praying at the same time. The rest of the family started to chow down all the good food that was set before us. It was at that point that the dad, noticing that I wasn’t eating, said to me, “Brother John, is there something wrong with the food?” Wow! I was caught. I didn’t know what to do or what to say, but I knew that our relationship was super important. It really mattered how I related to this man

and his family specifically and to the culture generally. I knew that to become an acceptable outsider, I had to become trustworthy to them within their cultural context no matter what my personal sensibilities might have been. So, I said to him that the food looked awesome, that there was nothing wrong and prepared to die from typhoid fever. I took the soiled fork and dove into the food with all the gusto of an American football player at a preseason training table.

I was shoveling food faster than I ever thought possible. I did this for two reasons. The first was to let my Uruguayan friends know I liked the food and the second was to put that green stuff on my fork past my palate so fast that my taste buds would never know what hit them. All the while, I was praying, "God, don't let me die this way."

The food was very tasty, once I slowed down from my culinary onslaught. I ate all that was given to me and really wished that I had taken a little more time in eating to enjoy the flavors. When I finished, the mom of the house came and took my plate and fork and put them in the truly dirty dish water.

As we were enjoying our conversation around the table, the mom said to me that there was one more portion

of the food left and she wanted to know if I wanted it. Like I said the food was great, so I told her “sure.”

The lady prepared the portion for me on the only plate left that was clean, but realized that there were no more forks. She said to herself what an idiot she was for already placing my fork in the dirty water and not having one left for me. The husband rebuked her for not thinking ahead, then said to me, “Brother John use my fork,” at which he grabbed his own “used” fork, put it into his mouth, cleaned it off with his lips and held it out for me to take. I looked into the sincere eyes of that man, the four prongs of that fork and knew I had to take it and use it for the glory of God. I knew that there was no more important matter on the earth right then for me than to show my appreciation to him and his family. I prayed, “God, you thought I asked for your protection before regarding the fork that had the goo on it and where it may have come from? But Lord, I’m praying again for your protection, because I saw where this fork has been and I know where it is going to go!”

What really matters? For the work that God had called me to do as a missionary, there was no more impactful action than for me to put aside my fear and put my trust in God and His calling. My act of eating with two tainted forks was not a grand spiritual move,

but my understanding of my placement in that family's life at that time was. The love of Christ was served by my submitting to the cultural distinctive and blessing that family by my joining in their way of doing things. It was more important than my fear, it was more important than my comfort and it was more important than my life.

I do not say that last phrase in an idle manner. We are given many Biblical examples of the faithful followers of God acknowledging this truth with their lives. Paul says in Philippians 1:18-20,

What then? Only that in every way whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in this I rejoice, yes, and I will rejoice. For I know that this shall turn out for my deliverance through your prayers and the provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, according to my earnest expectation and hope, that I shall not be put to shame in anything, but that with all boldness, Christ shall even now, as always, be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.

Paul knew that the things that matter are God things. He realized and was willing to acknowledge this truth with his life, continuing to serve Christ; or with

his death, having served Him. The very next line in the text of Philippians says, “For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.” There was and always has been an overriding importance to the things of God versus our puny concerns. It is not that Paul depreciated life, rather he knew that whatever God had in store was supremely better than anything he might conjure up by and through his own power, imagination or desire.

That is why when Saul from the Old Testament comes back from defeating the Amalekites, those whom he was commanded by God to completely destroy, he is rebuked by Samuel for not carrying out the command of God toward them. Saul saw the good things of the Amalekites, took them based on his own desires and only later thought to offer them to God. God wanted Saul and those who followed him to respond according to the desires of the Lord. Saul’s response of bringing those things as an offering to God fell on deaf ears. God wanted unrestrained compliance, not a humanly filtered reworking of the plan. Samuel says to Saul,

Has the Lord as much delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin

of divination, and insubordination is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, He has also rejected you from being king.

God and only God is the center of the universe. God's plan, and only God's plan, is the arrangement that has lasting worth. God's people submitting to Him and His plan and only God's people submitting to Him and His plan will enjoy His reward. What matters is God and everything flows out of that: Our love for God, our love for humanity, our care for the world, our hope for today, our hope for tomorrow, our hope for our communities, our lives, our children, our churches, our energies, our everything flows out of God.

When I was in seminary, my professor of worship made a bold statement and one that I took issue with at the time. He said that everything flows out of our worship of God. At the time I could not see how that meshed with the way I looked at the world. I have come to a refined perspective on that idea since then. Worship is the tip of the iceberg of obedience. Without our focus on God alone in worship (whether it is formal or informal) we will never arrive at the truth that what matters is God and His will over anything else. Saul tried to do it backwards. He disobeyed and tried to worship

to get it right. It doesn't work that way. We can only get it right in obediently worshiping God and, out of that, go and do. Worship acknowledges the foundation of all worth. It provides for the offering, but the offering is not the foundation. In fact, trust in God is the very building block for the foundation of all God worship. We can never truly worship that which we do not trust. Trust in God is the touchstone for a vital faith in and out of suffering. He is the source, therefore.

It is significant that God and only God is the foundation for all that really matters. In 1 Corinthians Chapter 3, Paul boldly proclaims that as a master builder who is wise and under God's grace that Christ alone is the foundation upon which all things eternal are built. This, then, implies that all actions of spiritual value flow out of this relationship to the foundation of all things. To get matters right, we need to understand this dialectic. The proverbial cart must not come before the horse. As the river of life flows out of the throne room of God, so does all that has worth and eternity as its basic DNA. What that leads to is an abandon to God and His purposes, no matter what may cause our eyes to sparkle, our ears to tickle or our hearts to fear.

Perhaps that is why Jesus Himself looks upon the widow's mite and implies that she gave better. Not just

that she gave all that she had, but also she gave from a heart that knew the foundation was God not the offering. There was an inherent trust in Him for her to give all that she had. It would be ludicrous any other way. In our culture, we look at that kind of trust in God and we call those types of people crazy. Yet it is a reflection of faith in what really matters. If God is God, He promises to take care of those who seek first His kingdom and His righteous ways. We say we believe this, but I have my doubts.

Doing what is right, even when it hurts, intrinsically affirms a concern for God having His will be done over any other idea. In the working out of this confession, the church of the living Lord Jesus Christ will find an old truth: Those who prove themselves faithful are those who consider God's scheme of things first over and above their very own lives and concerns. This will make His church look weird, just like it did 2000 years ago. To the Glory of God! That is what really matters.

CHAPTER 9

The Myth of American Christianity

As I am writing these words, the stock market, and maybe our whole economy, is coming unglued. Over the last few weeks the market has had swings of hundreds of points up and down. Included in these swings have been a steady decline of the overall worth of the market and I suppose our country's economic worth. Add to the mix the ever shifting oil and, therefore gas prices and we have a real economic mess. It has become so critical that our government has endeavored to bail out the economy by passing unprecedented economic bills with price tags in the hundreds of billions of dollars. This is significant

because there is not one of us who isn't affected by this crisis. I too am looking at my 401(k) leak away and am wondering whether or not I will have a retirement. The American Dream is standing on a precipice and considering whether jumping is better than hanging in there.

We have been a blessed nation. There is no doubt about this fact. As nations go, we have been historically protected by our distance from many of the conflicts of Europe and other parts of the globe lying on the other side of oceans. We have been given a rich supply of natural resources and the ability to utilize them. We have also had a most fortunate experiment in government which has had success as we purposed from our inception to be a people governed by the people. We have historically welcomed those who were the tired, the poor, the huddled masses yearning to breathe free. We have consistently opened our doors to the wretched refuse of others' shore, the homeless, the tempest tossed, just like Emma Lazarus' poem states on the Statue of Liberty in New York harbor.⁸ In some ways we have been blessed because we have been a blessing to the world. In other ways, we have been blessed because God just went out and blessed us, but we are an arrogant people.

I do not say that last statement lightly. If we were to survey our culture, review the distinctives of our society and look upon the messages that we send to the world around us, I believe we would be shocked at what we would find. We want the world our way and not finding the world our way, we complain, degrade and often write off the world as nonconvertible. The saddest of all these distinctives is when this model is applied to the church of the living Lord Jesus Christ. In some ways the American church is, in the words of the 1982 Amy Grant song, a “Fat Baby,” whose concern at many levels is its comfort and sensory delight over almost any other consideration. Now after I have thrown that hand grenade into the center of our journey of faith, please allow me to explain.

On multiple nights in 1991, I was participating in a new church plant in the city of San José de Mayo, Uruguay. This church start was the vision of two families from that city who contacted the national Baptist convention and the Uruguayan Mission of Southern Baptists to help begin the work there. I lived about 60 miles from the city and visited several times before the actual start of the work, in order to get acquainted with the area and the families who had the vision. After several preparatory visits, it was decided to invite a nearby Uruguayan pastor to help me with the initial leadership of the work. We

decided to begin our meetings on Friday evenings, using the homes of these families as the initial meeting places. I was to pick up the Uruguayan pastor on my way from my house to the meeting place and he and I were to be the leaders of worship and preaching; we alternated the responsibility of preaching every other week.

Many Friday nights we braved rain, hail, fog and other weather anomalies so we could lead the little church start there. Sometimes we would encounter animals on the rural roads which would often appear magically before us impeding our way. As I recall, there was almost never a night when something didn't cause us some problem on the road there or the road home. One evening it would be a horse on the road, another evening it would be a flock of sheep and on others it might be several cows. On one night in particular, as the Uruguayan pastor, his wife and I were returning to our homes on a two lane road, we found ourselves face to face with a bus passing another bus on a hill. To this day I do not know how I was able to swerve in time and not go head on into that massive vehicle. It was not easy to help that little church begin.

I also recall many of the worship times that we had in the beginning. After a few months, the numbers began to grow and we regularly had 15 to 20 people involved at each Friday night service. I will never forget

the image of the new congregation singing songs in the living room of one of the more humble members. Each of them sang as they were being led by the guitar playing Uruguayan pastor. The lively songs of praise were sung with all the energy that the members could supply taking in to consideration that the homes of Uruguay generally had no central heating at all and all the members were wearing winter coats. You could see everyone's breath while they sang. Yet as cold as it was at many of those indoor meetings, there was a love for Christ and a focus so on Him that the cold, cramp and humble rooms in which we met were of no consequence. It was a joy just to be together, honoring God and encouraging one another.

This is not the case in our culture. Or if it is the case, it is so very much not the norm. We, like our desire for the stock market, are oft times only worshiping when the music is right (the kind we like), when the room is the right temperature (the way we like it), when the pew is the right color, softness and location (the color we like, the cushion we appreciate, and the location we have always had if we like pews versus chairs). We complain that the preacher is not young enough, or the preacher is too young, or the preacher is too happy or the preacher is too dour. Maybe he wears the wrong color (it may not match

the carpet), or dresses too casual, too formal, too old, too contemporary, or maybe he looks dirty or even too clean. Maybe he has a funny accent, has too much hair, has no hair, is too boring, too lively. Maybe he even uses the Bible too much! This of course is not even mentioning the worship team that supports the worship ministry of the church and what they may look like, sing like or act like. Then, when we add the possibility that someone may come into our churches and be honest enough to share their hurts, challenges or even their defeats, we distance ourselves from them and hurl the epithet that they could in no way be enjoying the grace of God.

Is everything supposed to be perfect if we give in to God? By the looks of some of our churches and the messages that they are preaching that must be the case. If we look good, we must be good, right? If I have no problems in my life, I must be right with God, right? This is the challenge for the American church. Are the externals truly indicators of the heart and which is more important ultimately? Is it a weakness to reveal our real state of being? Must we always be number one to know the victory of our Savior, Jesus Christ? Is our prideful attitude in how we look over who we are acceptable to God?

The Old Testament boldly declares an idea that is repeated over and over again throughout the whole Bible. God is the source of salvation. He is the starting place for all grace and His choice is the foundation for all subsequent choices that man may make under grace. The word says in Exodus 15:2, “The Lord is my strength and song, and He has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise Him; my father’s God, and I will extol Him.” The mercy that believers receive is found in God alone and there is no room in that grace for any other attitude, but honor and praise to Him. Pride, therefore, is unacceptable to God and a criterion for waywardness from God. There is no room for arrogance in the household of God. Paul reiterates this truth when he says in 1 Corinthians 1:31, “Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

Jeremiah 9:23-24 deals with the negative of arrogantly boasting. The admonition of the text directly from the Lord is to boast of a relationship with God in intimate knowledge rather than to boast of the strength of our personal abilities and wealth. The only place for pride of any kind is in a humble, God focused relationship through the Savior of the world. The irony is pregnant: Our faith, our pride and our living out our salvation are only found in the hands of the King of glory, Jesus.

We, in the American church, actually know this intellectually, but we cannot get past the power of our dominant, comfort focused, temperature controlled, antiseptically clean Christian culture. Our American Christian culture has the trappings, look and feel of a powerful and holy institution, but beneath the surface it is cancerous in its profoundness or at least it is a veneer hiding the truth of our spiritual bankruptcy. We have become a people peculiar in our lofty tastes who run from church to church seeking the new thing (whatever that may be) and have missed the simple message of the cross. We dine on spiritual caviar, but miss the very staples of the simple, honest, contagious, foundational and victorious life of faith.

Jesus died for our sins in our place. Jesus rose for our benefit that we might have life eternal, abundant and real. Jesus gave us the Holy Spirit to encourage, empower and guide us here and now. Jesus brought us together as the common bond between all believers to make us a force for fellowship, faith and love for the entire world. Jesus continues to teach us by His Spirit and His Word, not that we might have more knowledge, but that we might be more a part of what He is doing on the earth. Jesus still knows our world is lost, fragile and hurting, but has made us who believe to reach out our hands of

actuated grace and love to that dying world. Jesus has given us a future with Him for eternity in love through grace with mercy based on His sacrifice over sin and every other preposition you can muster. Jesus paid it all for our victory, but not necessarily for our personal comfort.

The lie that the American church has propagated to mythic proportions is that suffering and the attendant discomfort that would come with it, should never be a part of the vital Christian life. In fact, when someone is suffering, for whatever reason, we as American Christians tend to jump toward two reasons. It is either some sin in our life that we have not confessed or Satan is the culprit for all our ills. Flip Wilson's "The devil made me do it," rings in my ears (and I am old enough to have heard him say it). If the devil is the mastermind behind my suffering, pain and discomfort, there is either something wrong with me, my church, or, forgive me, God's power and ability to keep me safe. If it is my personal sin that is impeding a vital Christian experience, should I not know about it clearly and wouldn't God convict me of it?

I have come to believe that the lie we spread in the American church (and, by the way, I do know that there are many churches that do not fall into this trap) is revealed in our concept of pain, its roots and its expression. There is a pervasive belief that if one is experiencing pain, that

there is something wrong in their life. They are deficient in their walk of faith, either in lacking that quality or have broken somehow with God in their life. The Biblical story of Job is reenacted over and over in the American church.

The hurt and suffering of one of our brothers or sisters in Christ is “ministered” too frequently by well-meaning, but often spiritually deficient “friends.” They gather around the downtrodden, armed with what they have heard from the pulpit and with what they know from their secular life, and begin to care for their fellow. The process regularly ends with frustration on the part of the “ministered to” and the “ministered by.” The former is frustrated because they are not heard as they share the trials they are experiencing. Even if they are in the middle of some sinful circumstance, the art of sensitively and spiritually listening to them is almost never applied. Galatians 6:1 should be pounding in the ears of the ministers of grace to the unfortunate. “Brethren, even if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, lest you too be tempted.” Unfortunately, this rarely occurs.

For this to happen in our churches, all of us must recognize our propensity for waywardness in the fragile

frame we have been given. The realization that sin can actually happen in the church by church members or even by the leaders of the church (including the pastors), is a facet of ministry that the American church cannot stand. What we do instead is to take out the biggest stick we can find and begin to flog the decrepit “sinner” into submission, church conformity or flight. We cannot adhere to the principle that we have frailty of any kind in our churches, no matter if the core of many of our churches reeks of pain and suffering and loss, and hopelessness and embarrassment and disenfranchisement.

Christmas 2008 was a significant time in the life of my church. I have had the privilege of ministering with a wonderful group of Christian people there for the last 10 years. I also believe my church is a normal American church with many of the challenges American churches have. We tend to want to look good for our church experience and often do not reveal our underlying life trials. During this Christmas, we used the theme of “The Christmas We Always Longed For.”

I was commissioned to present the first sermon in this series. My topic was the virgin birth. My direction for the sermon was the surprises that God brings into our lives, like the virgin birth, and how they are the very foundation for wonderful life change. In the context

of the message, I invited the church family to fill out a prayer slip and present it during a time of invitation at the end of the service. I encouraged the church to write down on the slips things they would really like to see happen during the Christmas season and asked for a real list of longed for surprises for this most magical time. I didn't ask them to make their list for Santa or to give me a list of things they wished someone would buy them. I asked them, if they could have anything from the Lord that Christmas, to write those things down. I asked them to be honest, straightforward and clear in their requests. As a church, we were going to pray 24 hours a day for the 7 days of Christmas week for the longed for surprises on those lists. Many came forward to place their requests in boxes at the front of the church. It was an inspiring sight.

On the following Monday the staff and I reviewed the requests on those slips. What we encountered was revealing. Our church family that on the outside looked so secure, so settled, so sure, so together, revealed the great set of needs at every level of life. We saw families that longed for their family members to be united in love during the Christmas time without the arguments and disappointment that make these special times so onerous. There were petitions for the breaking down

of walls of separation, anger and disassociation. Others revealed a longing for victory over addictions to drugs, alcohol, pornography and other inhibiting behaviors. Others asked for sensitivity to God so that the individual could face in power the challenges in which each of them were living. Some asked for their spouses to return to a place of love and affection. Others asked for love to reign in their homes where love had somehow been misplaced over time. Many asked for sons and daughters to come to know the truth about God, return to the truth about God or continue to make a stand for the Lord to whom they had committed. It was an honest list of longed for desires in the life of my church.

I am sure that my church is not alone in this. The American church has succumbed to a fallacy that states we must never be vulnerable and reveal our personal, private, and regularly hidden pain. Part of this is our pride. Again this is a parameter of waywardness from God over any other consideration. We may fool those around us, but God already knows. We may cheerfully drag our bodies to church, high five each other as we pass in the halls, but cower in our hearts that someone might somehow see inside our suffering, pain and hurt.

The other facet of that pride is the fear that someone may see us for who we really are. It is a fear that we won't

measure up somehow to the standard of the church (a standard that may or may not be Biblical). It is a fear that somehow we might fall short of what is required in the day to day living out of our faith. It is the fear that in recognizing our failures of faith that we have somehow not passed the test of heaven. We are commended to be perfect as our Lord is perfect and we fear the truth that in our daily walk we fail regularly, thus failing the test of perfection (I am quite aware that the admonition to be perfect can be understood to mean “lacking in nothing” that God has provided).

In the corporate setting of the American church this whole scenario is debilitating. Without the opportunity and willingness to express our weaknesses and strengths, we miss the power that is in the church. This power is not in our buildings with all their incredible features. It is not in our programs with their entire well thought out and multi-faceted approaches. It is not found in our ability to communicate the messages of our churches across many different platforms through our use of audio, visual, internet or portable computer driven receptors.

No, the power of the church, even the American church, is the power that has always belonged to the church. The power of the church is its redeemed population submitted to the Holy Spirit's leading in

openness, given to each other without fear, or shame, or remorse, or hesitance. The first church that there ever was knew this power. Acts 2:43-47 proffers this truth in the unity and openness of the Jerusalem church. It says,

And everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. And all those who had believed were together, and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions, and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. And day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God, and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.

I am not offering a new communism for the church; rather I am reminded that the people of the church, with all of their weaknesses and strengths, are the real asset of the church. Fractured, fragile and fallible people are the real agents of God's hand upon the earth. The person sitting next to us on the pew is the one that God wants to use for His purposes as much as He wants to use each of

us, no matter how good or bad we may look to an outside perusal. In our spectator expression of Christianity here in the United States, we will continue to struggle with our place in God's work if we don't get this straight.

Richard Moore is a dear friend of mine. He is the pastor of a church in a desert community in Southern California. Richard and I have the same birthday, so he must be a great guy, if only for that reason. There are other, more significant reasons that Richard is a great guy.

Richard and I met through means that can only be categorized as God's hand. While I was a missionary in Uruguay, our family underwent a significant, and quite honestly, massively destructive event. I had returned to the United States for a time, when I was called back to Uruguay for an emergency that was an extension of this family problem. My father took me to the airport in San Diego to see me off (this was in the pre 9/11 days when someone could actually sit with you at the gate until your plane was ready). My plane was standing by, so my father and I prayed, exchanged sad hugs and I boarded the aircraft for my all day trip back to the country where I was serving the Lord to a family future that looked tenuous.

While my father was watching my plane prepare to depart, a young boy came alongside of him. My father is one of the most gregarious people I know, so it was natural for him, even in his heavy heartedness, to reach out to the youngster and chat with him. The boy's father, Richard Moore, saw his son talking to my father, and as all parents may feel, wanted to know who the old guy was talking so openly with his boy.

Richard also came alongside of my dad and greeted him. He introduced himself as the boy's dad and asked my dad if he was waiting for someone to come in or seeing someone off. My dad replied that he was seeing me off. Richard asked where I was going, to which my father replied, "South America."

"Why is he going down there?" he said.

"He's a Southern Baptist missionary down there"

Richard immediately said, "I'm a Southern Baptist pastor."

This began an animated exchange between my dad and Richard that eventually led to my father actually trying to run down the jetway to stop the plane so I could meet this man who just happened to be at the airport at the same time. You can imagine the excitement my father generated at the gate when he tried to drag this pastor down the ramp to meet me with a full contingent

of ground personnel trying to stop him. My dad only knew I was hurting and that, to him, God had provided a fellow Christian and fellow servant of the Lord to encourage me.

This initial connection with Richard led to his church praying for me and my family on the mission field. It subsequently led to my getting to know him face to face when we returned to the United States in a very disjointed and broken state. It led to him guiding his church to reach out to each of the members of my family in love and ministering to us as best they could. It led to a continued relationship where I was a person of worth to that little congregation while being told by others in the faith that God was done with using me. It led to an affirmation of encouragement to do the right things even in an atmosphere of feelings overriding what faith I might have had. It led to a lasting relationship of ministry for Christ's sake to those who have not received His word or know His greatness, no matter who they might be.

Richard Moore, along with his church, loved me when I was unlovable by some standards. He and his church touched my life when so many in the faith would have nothing to do with me. He and his church affirmed my call instead of telling me that God was done with me.

He and his church reminded me that it is the humble that God uses and not the proud.

The American church needs a wakeup call. Perhaps the economy will be that call, but nevertheless, we are in need of a simple approach to the Christian life. We need one that is open and truly honest in the context of the doing of church and the encouragement to faith. We no longer need the forced facades of fellowship and faith that in reality denigrate the cause of Jesus Christ. We no longer need to see buildings and programs as the acid test for success in the exercise of our life in Christ. We no longer need to list the names of all our church members as a proud list of accomplishing the task of evangelism when we don't know where they are or what they are up to since arriving on the list.

The Christian faith is not about doing stuff; rather, it is all about relationship within the context of honesty, transparency, purposeful and relational expansion growth, and mutual growth. Christianity must find, and American Christianity must remember, that people are the object of God's love and work on the earth. If we provide beautiful infrastructure, awesome, well-oiled programs and forget people in the doing of it all, we miss the very point of why the church is on the earth. The American Christian experience must never evaluate its

success by events or places. The church must arrive at an ever increasing growth in being conformed to the image of the Ever Living One over constructing any other life goal.

2 Peter 1 says it better than I could ever express it.

Now for this very reason also, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in your moral excellence, knowledge; and in your knowledge, self-control, and in your self-control, perseverance, and in your perseverance, godliness; and in your godliness, brotherly kindness, and in your brotherly kindness, love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For he who lacks these qualities is blind or short-sighted, having forgotten his purification from his former sins. Therefore, brethren, be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you; for as long as you practice these things, you will never stumble; for in this way the entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be abundantly supplied to you.

We must come to grips with this Biblical mandate here in the American church. The admonition is simple, but the practice is more than challenging, for it assaults the church at its cultural foundations. This challenges every sensitive leader and believer in the American church to view ministry through the lens of actuated followers of Christ who are continuing to grow in openness and honesty, casting far from themselves the millstone of “looking good” over being good. It is a task we must commit to with all diligence, for the costs are far too weighty in a world that is clearly on its way to hell without a savior.

CHAPTER 10

The Way of the Cross

I knew Jesus had just died on the cross. I could see it on the faces of the worship team of my church. The sad part was, they all knew He had risen from the grave and was alive. Somehow their faces had missed that part. Or maybe they had just become used to the truth in the midst of the drudgery of doing church. Whatever the case, they looked like someone had died, never to be seen again.

Of course that is not every Sunday's visual expression for the team, but the idea that Jesus has died for our sins, taking the penalty that we should have received, ought

to bludgeon us with joy. Added to this is the awesome truth that He not only died, but has risen from that death and is alive forevermore. That this reality is mind boggling is not a hard pill to swallow. The disciples themselves had a difficult time with the whole death, burial and resurrection thing. The disciple Thomas said he wouldn't believe it until he could give Jesus a post-mortem, pre-ascension examination. For that statement, he is forever linked with doubt, but we are just like him. We've heard the story, believed the story intellectually, trusted the storyteller and accepted Christ Jesus as Lord and Savior, but continue to act joyless, faithless, hopeless and, without a doubt, powerless.

Jesus said to those same disciples some time before His death, that He "was the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). He was the proverbial "it." As the very nexus of salvation, He was the only way to a forever with God the Father in heaven. Yet if one were to follow Him (and I mean, really follow Him in faith), that one would be assured of their place in heaven then and assured of a life more full now than they could ever imagine. We throw that assurance around in our churches as if it was the cheapest aspect of salvation without the follow up of following.

The command of walking in a manner worthy of the calling of Christ is not a shallow mandate. The imagery that Jesus gives us in the gospels is more than adequate in demanding a commitment that transcends the normative life experience. He says to those who would follow Him to “pick up their cross and follow.” It would take the normal person no time at all to grasp the profoundness of this level of “calling.” The cross was not an ornament to be worn around the neck. It was not a funny geometric design that somehow looks pretty on our buildings or logoized on our stationary. The cross was a feature of torturous execution. It was clearly a symbol of ultimate commitment. It signified death to the one who would fall under its power and it still does.

The difference, however, is that the power of the cross is wielded now, not by the Roman authorities, or affirmed by the religious establishment of Jerusalem, but rather by the very hand of God. Colossians 2:14 says that God in Christ has taken all our sin and the judgments that were against us, removed it out of our path and “nailed it to the cross.” The power the cross now holds for us is not death, but freedom from the death we should have had. The power of the cross is not a fear of slavery to sin any more, but the life giving, and abundant life giving, of the way that cross leads. However, it still requires our death. This

is the challenge for all believers; for the cross demands we give ourselves away to God daily, to His children daily and to the world in need of the Savior daily. It is our choice to submit to His power and die, but it is a death that oozes the very love of God for His creation as we journey each day in light of His purposes. That death, however, may come in interesting and sometimes very strange circumstances.

I was, at the time, the pastor of the First Baptist Church of the little town of Pleasant Grove, Utah. In fact, I was the pastor of the only Baptist church in the town of Pleasant Grove; not to mention, I was the only pastor of any church that wasn't Mormon in the town of Pleasant Grove. On this particular Sunday, we were sending off a couple who were going to seminary to undergird the husband's call to the music ministry. We had planned for them to share in music and a testimony to their call. I, myself, had been called to the church as their pastor about 2 years after I had returned from the mission field and had up to this point been there for about 2 years. Their special service caused me to remember distinctly how I was called to serve this little church.

The senior pastor of the church where I was a member in Salt Lake City was going out of town and he asked me if I would preach for him in his absence. Of course

at that time I was thrilled with the invitation since the only folks who were letting me preach were those at the prison. I'm sure they enjoyed my oratorical skills there, but I think they really didn't have much to say about it. They were probably just glad to get out of their cells and do something different. I accepted the pastor's invitation and prepared for my opportunity to share God's word.

The day arrived and I dutifully and joyfully presented the message in all three services of the church. I can attest that speaking back to back like that is a drain physically, emotionally and spiritually. I did my best to encourage in each of the services. What I didn't know at the time, but found out later, was the services were recorded.

In one of the services that day was a couple visiting from Pleasant Grove (a town about 30 miles south of Salt Lake City). They were members of the church in Pleasant Grove and knew that the church was looking for a pastor. They ordered the tape from the message and took it down to the church when they returned home. What I didn't know was that these people were very excited about the possibility of having me come as their pastor. They were so excited that they took that tape and shared it with the other members of the little church down south. The church asked me, sometime later, to come down to the

First Baptist Church and preach to fill an open date that they had on their schedule since they were pastorless.

Again, I was excited to be able to exercise my giftedness. I accepted the invitation and preached to the congregation there. After the service, they had a fellowship with food and a time to chat with each other. In that fellowship, I was approached by several members of the church who all looked official. They asked me if I would come back to preach again the following Sunday, but with the proposal to do it on that Sunday with the idea of my being presented as a candidate to fill the role of their pastor. I was shocked at their request and was hesitant to give them more than an okay to just preach the following Sunday. I told them that they had only heard me once and really didn't know my background to be able to make that kind of decision. They all told me that they heard the tape and had already investigated who I was through the "spies" that had visited my home church in Salt Lake. They encouraged me to pray about it.

It was in that moment that I shared with them my feelings of disgrace at returning home from the mission field with a broken family and heavy heart. I told them honestly and quite openly that some had already told me I was no longer able to be used by God and that

they might need to know that. Their response was that they already knew what was going on in my life and they knew God was in this decision. The couple who spied me out at my home church just stood in the fringe of the crowd and smiled.

As I sat in the service reminiscing, I began to get a little perturbed with the couple who were preparing to leave. First off they didn't arrive on time. Even though I spent a significant time in South America under the stereotypical Latino time warp of doing everything at least a half hour to an hour later than planned, my American conditioning was kicking in. I kept looking at my watch and wondering, honestly, how they could be so inconsiderate. I got up and asked one of our deacons to give them a call.

The answer I got was that their power had gone out and everyone in their house was just now getting up! They were trying to get everyone going, but were to be at least 20 minutes more. I informed our little congregation and asked them to do what no large congregation would ever do. I asked them if it was all right to wait for them since it was their special service and they were, to a certain degree, the "stars of the show." Of course the church had no problem with waiting, so we continued to enjoy our increasingly "lazy Sunday morning" together.

The couple finally arrived and we began the service in earnest. I informed the pair that their musical numbers would be right before the sermon. They quickly setup their home karaoke system on the platform and we continued with the prepared, but now slightly truncated service agenda.

We eventually arrived at the couple's time in the service. They first shared about their call to music ministry and then their desire to go to seminary to round out their education for service. At that point the wife placed the tape into the karaoke machine so that the husband could share in song. Almost immediately after the music began, the husband said, "That's not the song." The wife replied, "But that's the tape," with a look that said, "I don't understand."

"It's later on the tape," he said.

At that point she started to fast forward the uncued tape in order to find the correct song. Thinking about this incident now, I praise God that we have moved technologically from tapes to CDs and their ability to cue a song in seconds. The poor lady tried and tried to find the song and always just missed too long or too short. Finally the husband put down his microphone and got on his knees before the karaoke machine to try and find the illusive song. This whole process took at

least 20 more minutes. There they were, the couple trying to mess with the tape player imbedded in their home karaoke machine, kneeling in front of the whole congregation who were all patiently waiting for the song. There I was, sitting in the front pew, fuming at the chaos of the whole thing, fuming with the wasted time and fuming at the couple who not only arrived late, but who were clearly not prepared.

That's when it occurred to me. This couple was the very couple who sat in my previous home church, heard me preach, ordered the tape of my sermon and shared it with the little church in Pleasant Grove. They were the couple on the fringe of the crowd two years before, smiling at how God had worked it all out for His glory in bringing this broken and recovering servant of God back to a place of validated service. In shame, though no one but God knew it, I asked His forgiveness and I waited patiently until they found the song.

I understood in that moment what it means to die for Christ's sake. It was not about keeping the service right on schedule: Remember Paul had to stop the service at Troas when Eutychus fell out the window and was pronounced "dead on arrival." Here were two people who had not only had a significant impact in my life, but were also on the verge of injecting themselves into the

very work that I had committed to myself. The service was in reality not about me and surely not about them. It was, is and forever will be only about Jesus. That is what it means to die for Christ. We must remove ourselves from the list of important guests and place forever the name of Christ as the focus of all our service. The way of the cross is a road that begins and can only begin with an honest and wholly commitment to this truth. We must die, so that Christ, empowering us, may have His way with us as we subsequently make His concerns our concerns.

To get on to the way of the cross we must not only die to ourselves, but we must also listen intently to the Master's voice. This most important next step on the way of the cross must be a focused action so that we might never miss anything important that the Lord would have us do on the way.

My wife is an excellent cook. She, being the person that she is, would never brag about her cooking, but she is great. One day after arriving home from a hard day at the church, I found her in the kitchen cooking up what to my nose seemed to be a wonderful evening meal. I recall the smell of roast, mashed potatoes, fresh green beans and saw a freshly tossed green salad. She said that Lauren, my oldest daughter had called and was

ready to be picked up from work. She worked at a local combination type store that was a department store and a grocery store all under one roof. My wife asked if I could go and pick up a few things from the store since I was going to pick up our daughter.

I asked her what it was that she needed me to pick up and she said, "Oh, just a couple of three things."

I have learned that if my wife asks me to get a couple of things at the store, like 2, I have no problem remembering what it is. She said the magic memory word and it was the number 3. If she asks me to get 3 or more of anything I have to get some paper and write it down to get it right. "What do you need?" I asked. She said, "I need some rolls for dinner, some milk and why don't you get some ice cream too." "Ice cream," I thought. Yum!

So I got out the paper and wrote down ice cream, milk and rolls.

I drove to the store to pick up my daughter and found her just getting off from working at one of the cash registers. I told her we would go in a minute, but that I had to buy a few things for dinner. She asked me what I needed to get. I said, "Let me see on my list." I told her we needed ice cream and milk, which she pointed out, was in the back of the store. We went directly to the

ice cream case and picked out a flavor we knew everyone would like. We got the milk, and then she asked me, “Is there anything else?” I looked at the list, saw “rolls” and said we needed to get some toilet paper. She told me there was a really good sale on toilet paper, that if you bought one 24 roll pack, you got the second 24 roll pack for free. So we went and picked out two 24 pack rolls of toilet paper. 48 rolls of toilet paper!

Upon arriving at home, my daughter went into the kitchen first with the milk and the ice cream and I followed carrying the two 24 pack rolls of toilet paper one in each hand. When I proudly entered the room with my deal on rolls, my wife asked me, “Did you get the dinner rolls?”

I stood there stunned as I realized the rolls on the list were not toilet paper rolls, but dinner rolls. My daughter looked at me like I was completely deranged as she had become a part of this cruel switch of items from the store. My wife looked at me in disbelief. I had listened to her when she asked me to get the stuff for dinner, but I hadn’t focused clearly on the request. I did not listen to her carefully. I got sidetracked by the drive, by the ice cream, by the store and by picking up my daughter, but I had totally missed the commission I had been given by my beloved. I had not listened intently and with a focused

ear. Fortunately the toilet paper did eventually become quite handy, but we didn't have any rolls for dinner that night.

The way of the cross has at its base the death of the follower and the full attention of the follower to the message of the cross is required for the harmonic exercise of God's will in and through the one who has been called, but the follower must also believe in the possibilities of the cross. The modern disciple must actually believe that the message he or she has carefully and intently heard can truly have awesome results in the lives of those who submit to its power. No matter what the situation, no matter what may seem to be the reality of the moment, the way of the cross must be accepted as true and effective.

I love soccer, if you haven't figured that out yet. It is my favorite game to watch and to play. At my advanced age, my soccer days are limited, but I do have some awesome opportunities to still be in the mix of it all. I am still a part of an over 30 soccer league where I play goalie and could be the dad, age-wise, for more than a few of my teammates. My joy during the soccer season is exemplified, not only by playing, but also by my coaching a high school soccer team and the chaplaincy I provide for the Real Salt Lake team in Major League Soccer.

When I was a younger man, I went on a mission trip as a soccer player with a special summer ministry team through Athletes in Action, the sports ministry of Campus Crusade for Christ. Our team was made up of college soccer players, former players and professional soccer players. All of us were believers in Jesus Christ and were invited to participate in the trip which was scheduled originally to China. We, however, had our plans change through some political events at the time which prevented us entrance into China. The trip was rescheduled hurriedly for Jamaica and Brazil.

The team trained for two weeks in Colorado prior to our trip south. I remember with fondness the two-a-days we had during that time, as we got acquainted not only as soccer players on the pitch, but also as fellow believers in Jesus Christ. We came from varied backgrounds, cultures and, especially on my part, different ages. I was the old man on the team at about 29 years of age. We trained physically and spiritually for our trip through the island of Jamaica and later through Brazil.

Part of the evangelistic plan for the trip was to prepare a testimony and a gospel presentation for every game that we played. Each player was to work on his testimony so that they could present it in about three minutes. We also practiced sharing the “Four Spiritual Laws” gospel

tract so that any one of us could do that part also. The goal was to play the game as an opening for sharing the truths about Jesus. At half time of each game we would share with the crowd and after the game we would share with the opposing team in their locker room. The team members chose before the game who was going to share each of the planned parts of the presentation. That was the plan, although as we got to some of our locations we had to change what we wanted to do to accommodate the circumstances of each game.

Towards the end of our trip, after thousands of miles of travel and almost all of our games under our belt, we found ourselves in the city of Teresina, Piaui, Brazil. I don't remember the team we were playing there, except to say that we played in the Estádio Governador Alberto Tavares Silva, a stadium that held about 60,000 fans. What I do remember was how hot it was. The game was scheduled for 9:00 p.m. because of the heat and if my memory serves me, it was 90 degrees Fahrenheit at game time. I also remember that it was my turn to share my testimony of faith in Christ in the locker room of the other team after the game.

The first half was actually pretty even as we kept the Brazilian side at bay for most of the half. Towards the end of the half the Brazilians took a shot that deflected off

one of my players and caught me diving the wrong way to save the shot. The ball entered the goal and we entered the locker room down 1 to 0. Our coach encouraged us at half time and told us to hang in there since we were doing well in keeping the Brazilian team, for the most part, out of our net.

We went out to play the second half and it became immediately obvious that the team from Teresina had used the first half to sensitively and tactically find our weaknesses. For the next 45 minutes I was either stopping shots or pulling the ball out of our net. I swear I must have saved 100 shots on goal in the second half (that may be a little exaggerated). What I know is that they scored 6 goals to our none, in that second half. We lost the game 7 to 0; and I felt humiliated as the goalie that let in 7 goals. 7 goals!

Then I remembered I had to go into the locker room of the other team and share my testimony of faith to the guys who just shot 7 goals past me. Soccer-wise I was completely dejected. I didn't want to do it at all. My coach, who is still a good friend, tried to encourage me. I recall sitting down in the corner of the locker room, my legs pulled up tight to my chest as our Brazilian interpreter gave opening remarks to the other team. With all honesty, I just didn't want to be faithful to what

God had called me to do in that moment. Yes, I had submitted to Him in going on the trip. Yes, I had listened carefully to that call and knew intellectually that He was able to accomplish great things. In that specific moment I didn't believe He would ever want to use a guy like me who had been so embarrassed and would look so stupid before the very guys that had stuck in 7 goals against me! "Why would they want to listen to me," I thought. The interpreter ended his introductions and my coach said, "It's your turn, John."

I slowly got to my feet and like a zombie went through my prepared testimony concerning how I had become a believer in the Lord. The other team was standing there listening as I shared and as my testimony was translated into Portuguese. I finished with what felt like to me a disgraced message of my life and I sat back down in the corner, dejected, mortified and feeling useless. The player whose turn it was to present the gospel message got up and shared how each of the players from Brazil also could receive Christ as Savior and Lord. When he got to the part where he asked them who wanted to accept Jesus, 7 players from the opposing team raised their hands. 7 players! One for each goal! What I evaluated as a loss turned out to be a glorious miracle of faith.

In our puny circumstance driven lives we often limit the very King of the Universe in what He can do. In that locker room 26 years ago, I learned a valuable lesson. God can, He does and will show up and He does so according to His power and purpose. It is not dependent on our personal acumen or erudition. It is not dependent on our performance at any level. It is only dependent upon the faithful follower following the way of the cross with what they have in the moment, believing that God is able.

The way of the cross is all about bringing ourselves to the foot of that cross and recognizing what has really gone on in that place. God reveals His truth for each of us to accept and experience that there is a right way. The way of the cross clearly announces the truth that the world is full of suffering and shame. The way of the cross obviously demonstrates that out of suffering, seeming shame and denigration a miracle of life may arise for our benefit. The way of the cross is seeing, in Jesus, that righteousness, the doing of good under His most able hand, always endures and is always right. The way of the cross reminds us that even in Jesus it may not be received well or at all. The way of the cross demands that we confront ourselves and appraise ourselves for who we really are and run to the one who can really make a difference. The way of the cross encourages us to see

the victory that it provides for every disappointment we may suffer. The way of the cross reminds us, when we get wrapped up in ourselves and our own little worlds, what really matters. The way of the cross leaves no room for arrogant prancing and compels us and our culture to humility, honesty and grace. The way of the cross and the message that it speaks, "Is the power of God," to confront our every hurt, suffering, disappointment and shame.

To those of us who suffer, have suffered and probably will suffer somewhere down the road, let us give our lives away to the only one is able to keep us forever as we fully trust His power and purposes. As we do that, no matter the circumstance, let us keep on doing the things that will endure forever. Let us do what is right, even though it hurts. To the Glory of God!

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