

The Parable of the Fish

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DEDICATION

Like a man lost in the desert for so long he has forgotten that he is thirsty.
We too have been lost in this wasteland of wealth and independence for so
long that we have forgotten that we need God.

And we cannot see that He has never left us.

This book is dedicated to all my Christian brothers and sisters living in a
first world country who are searching for a personal relationship with God.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This journey between here and there has its moments. Some happy, some sad. When I meet other Christians I wonder about what kind of relationship we will have together over there, where heaven begins and this place ends. I have been blessed by my family, friends, mentors, teachers, counselors, pastors, priests and nuns who have entered into and out of my life.

I am deeply grateful for their love and companionship on this long journey home.

1 THE PARABLE OF THE FISH

One quiet morning a priest sat praying in his cell behind the tall walls of the old monastery. He pleaded with God to show himself. He sat in his cell everyday in solitude and felt disconnected. Realizing he did not fully understand God's presence in his life, he decided to speak to a fish about it. Without a word, he walked through the courtyard, past the barns and livestock pens where his friends were diligently working, and down the path that lead to Crystal Water Lake. He followed the path so lost in his struggle to understand God; he did not notice the cool air against his skin and the warmth of the rising sun. A bright sun stood high in the sky watching the clouds slowly migrate south. Soon the priest found himself at the water's edge.

Removing his linen shoes, the priest strolled upon the white sandy beach. His long robes gently swept the sand smooth as he passed along the beach pondering the sight of the clear waters and the dancing reflection of the heavenly sunlight.

An old rowboat rested on the shore line rocked gently by the small waves. So without much thought; the priest pushed rowboat into the cool water. He stepped in, sat down and began to row. After a while, the priest found himself far from shore and he stopped rowing letting the boat drift. He patiently waited for a fish to come along. He did not wait long. A sparkling fish lazily swam up to the boat curious of the odd shape that was making so much noise on top of his quiet world. When the fish was close enough, the priest reached down and gently picked up the fish.

The priest asked the fish, "What is the water like?"

Considering the questions, the fish rubbed his chin and asked, "What is water?"

Do you know where you are?

2 THE NICENE CREED

I believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible.

I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages. God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father; Through him all things were made. For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven, and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man.

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, he suffered death and was buried, and rose again on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets.

I believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. I confess one baptism for the forgiveness of sins and I look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen.

- Nicene Creed (AD 325)

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The Nicene Creed is a Christian statement of faith that is the only ecumenical creed because it is accepted as authoritative by the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, and major Protestant churches. The Nicene Creed was written in AD 325 and completed in its present form in 381. Over 300 bishops from all over the world gathered to write the creed, in response to Arianism, a philosophy that denied Jesus was fully God. The Nicene Creed ultimately explains Christianity's teachings about the Trinity, but it also affirms historical realities of Jesus' life. Even though the creed does not directly quote Scripture, it is based on biblical concepts and truths.

May we come to know this creed. And may we accept that our lives are a small part of the His great story.

It is where we are.

Definitions:

- “Consubstantial” means substance. The Nicene Creed professes that Jesus and the Father are of one substance.
- “Incarnate” means in human form. This reveals that Jesus the Son of God was given a human body through the motherhood of the Blessed Virgin Mary.
- “Apostle” means witness. One who witnessed Jesus Christ while He was here on earth.
- “catholic (little ‘c’)” means universal. The catholic church means the universal church. There is one church in God’s eye. This does not refer to the Catholic Church (big ‘C’) which is a denomination of the Christian faith.

3 THE MAN AND THE PUPPY

The Man loved the puppy; the puppy loved the Man.

Early one morning, the Man opened the front gate and invited to puppy to go for walk. The puppy followed the Man wagging his tail with joy. The puppy did not understand that to follow was to never return. And if asked, the puppy would not have even understood where he was.

Outside the Man pointed to the clearing and smiled. The puppy ran out onto the freshly cut grass to play. He did not know that the Man had watered the clearing so the ground would be soft and that He had removed all of the thistles so his tender paws would not be pierced by thorns. The puppy simply enjoyed the wide open clearing, running in circles and barking wildly.

The Man watched the lion; the lion watched the Man.

The puppy could not see all there was to see yet he felt for a moment that something was wrong but then he discovered a leaf and he happily followed the leaf wherever the wind blew it. Down the path to a white dirt road the Man walked and the puppy followed head down sniffing the ground. For a while, they walked together enjoying each other's company. The puppy began to run ahead.

In the middle of the road lay a dead bird. The bird smelled strange to the puppy; he approached carefully sniffing the air. The lion had placed the dead bird in the road; the lion watched the puppy from a distance.

"No," said the Man to the puppy as He watched the puppy's interest grow. The lion began to creep closer. The puppy began to sniff the dead bird again; suddenly the puppy wanted to taste this new smell. The Man smacked the puppy.

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The puppy cried. The Man continued His walk past the dead bird and the puppy followed. The lion did not follow, for above all, the lion feared the Man.

A ditch began to run alongside of the dirt road that was designed to collect rainwater from the frequent storms. The puppy had never seen such a steep incline and the Man gently guided the puppy back to the center of the road, but eventually the puppy resisted. The Man allowed the puppy to tumble head first down the embankment all the while following his beloved puppy.

The puppy got a boo-boo on his leg.

The Man picked up the puppy without a word and held him close. Standing in the ditch, the Man held his puppy; the puppy whimpered. The Man, carrying his little friend, climbed out of the ditch and set the puppy down once again in the middle of the road. The boo-boo was gone. The puppy excitedly ran ahead of the Man forgetting about the ditch and the boo-boo.

As time passed, the Man and the puppy grew closer. They walked side by side and had many great adventures on the road home. One day their new home stood before them and the Man and the puppy were happy. Their long walk was over.

The Man loved the puppy; the puppy loved the Man.

4 GOD SPEAKS

Life is fragile. One small misstep and everything comes down. Whatever control or destiny we think we have is stripped away whenever the smallest element of our physical being is threatened. Our heart has to beat, our lungs have to pull in air, our brain has to do whatever it does, and our bodies need to sleep.

Every morning at 3am, I was awake. It was gentle at first so that I hardly noticed other than to register the time and then roll over where I found sleep once again.

At the end of the first year, the very thought of sleeping was unpleasant, like trying to ignore your next door neighbors while you unload the groceries from your car hoping they believe the lie that you don't really see them. I remember thinking that I wasn't allowed to ignore the topic anymore. Except that I didn't know what the topic was. So I went to the doctor and told him that I was depressed, stressed out, and angry. All of this was true but I never mentioned the amount of hate and the unforgiveness stored in my heart. It never occurred to me to tell the doctor that I had no relationship with God.

The antidepressants didn't work for the sleep issue although they did lower my anxiety. I went to work, distracted myself with sports, drank, popped the occasionally Tylenol PM and hoped for the best. Another year of sleep deprivation pushed by and I decided to give God a try.

How many of us do that?

As if the God is just one option among many, like going to the mall and trying on a pair of shoes. Yet, once I allowed the thought of turning to God inside, hope brought some measure of relief. Hope tasted like a sip of cool water on a hot cloudless day and it dawned on me that God was the only

option that I have ever had.

I prayed for help in a very basic way, “God, I need help. Life isn’t pretty right now and if you are there, I could use your help.”

It wasn’t graceful. I didn’t really understand who God was and I certainly was not interested in following Him. All I can say is that my ignorant plea was heard. And I heard that still small voice. I was sitting in my room thinking, did I really just hear that? My faith was so small but it was enough for God. In Hebrews Chapter 11, it says, “Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.” I was desperately hopeful that God might help me if He chose.

Since I asked for help, God stayed with me; He wasn’t leaving. And He didn’t tell me what I wanted to hear most of the time. Often, my worldview or opinion was leveled by a simple word. There were time when it simply hurt to hear the truth. And I had a sense that the voice held back; I was allowed to know that it was holding back. I was forced to concede that I couldn’t absorb any more than a single word.

The messages were simple and directive: Forgive, Love, Listen, Patience, Wait, No, Later.

I felt like a child being taught how to speak and I resented it. Yet, that voice persisted. He never stopped pushing warmth down upon me, comforting me while I struggled against what it had to say. My way was losing ground and His way was making more sense.

“Go to church.”

So I parked my car in the church parking lot and wept. Then I would drive away wondering what that was all about. As time passed, I mustered the courage to go inside where I eventually met a few guys to hang out with and I began to understand who this God was. I still hated Christians and the whole idea of church but I would still show up from time to time because God never left me alone.

I finally told a Christian friend about the 3am problem and he told me about this kid named, Samuel. In the Book of Samuel, God talks to this little boy. He calls to him in the middle of the night. It is a good story and I recommend it. The point is that God speaks. And at that moment, I knew who was waking me up. And deep inside my soul, I knew that it was God waking me up all along, I just didn’t want to face Him.

At 3am, I woke. I sat up in bed. There was a darkness that had settled

around me as I sat there listening to my wife breathing. I felt like I was going to scream so I went down stairs. By the time I got to the first floor, the tears were streaming down my face and in the kitchen I let it all go before God. I cannot explain what that was like other than to say He does love. I think I even yelled at Him but who better to hear your cries? He actually cares to be inside the deepest corners of your soul.

I asked Him, Where have you been? And He said, I have always been here.

I told Him that I couldn't do this anymore and I needed Him. I needed His help. God agreed.

And then I told Him that I didn't believe in His son, Jesus. I told him that I hated Christians, they were all hypocrites and I hated them all.

He said He understood and that He would help me through my thoughts. I told him that I would accept His help, whatever that meant, because anything had to be better than what I was living day to day.

I told Him that I would follow Him.

After a while, my tears subsided and I got off my knees and sat down at my computer desk.

"Go to church," God said.

"I don't think so," I replied. It was too early.

"Do you like waking up at 3am?" God said with a smile.

We both laughed. I hopped on the internet and went to the church's website. There was a group meeting at 6am. Of course, there was.

"Ok," was all that I could say so we waited for 6am.

As I drove to church that morning, I tried to engage God in some kind of conversation but He didn't have anything more to say. I look back on that moment and realize that I was complaining and I now understand that God loves us more than we can ever understand. God loved me so much that morning that He chose to ignore me. I wasn't in the right frame of mind.

As I hoped that the church parking lot would be empty, there were cars. As I walked to the sanctuary, I hoped that the church would be closed but the doors were open.

It takes small steps when building up your faith. Just go. One step at a

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time. You do not have to understand the journey.

I walked into the sanctuary where the pastor and the elders were discussing which men of the church needed this upcoming men's retreat the most. The pastor stood up and said, "Stephen?" Apparently, I was on the list. And I felt God nod that this is what He wanted me to do. I had to go to this retreat. I was on the road to peace, on the road to healing.

God does speak.

I told a Catholic nun about my experience. She smiled and said, "The Bible shows us the nature of God. It teaches us how the Holy Father deals with His children."

I like that very much. We can learn about the nature of God through the Bible. The God of now. The God who is with you as you read this small book. The God who is dealing with you in your brokenness; who is with you every moment of your life.

While we might believe God exists, there is a general sense in some Christian circles that He would never actually visit His children. And if He does, it is only with those special people. A rare event.

God speaks. He is not a rare event. You are that special person.

This is the relationship that is open to us.

God is speaking.

Are we listening?

There are two kinds of people: those who say to God, "Thy will be done," and those to whom God says, "All right, then, have it your way" - C.S. Lewis

5 A CUP

The Father placed a clear glass cup filled with milk on the kitchen table before his daughter.

“What is this?”

“A cup,” the daughter answered.

“No. Try again.”

The boy stared at the cup sitting before him. “Milk,” the young girl said with a smile.

“Very good,” the Father said.

“May I drink it?”

“Yes, you may.”

The girl drank her milk.

“What are you?” the Father asked.

“I am a Christian.”

“Why?”

“I have the Holy Spirit inside me.”

“Very good,” the Father said.

We are what fills us.

6 WHO IS GOD?

The Book of Nathan, Chapter Two

“When Jesus came of age, his mother, Mary asked Jesus what kind of ice cream that He would like to eat? Jesus considered this question and said He would like chocolate ice cream. So Mary, the mother of God, made Him chocolate ice cream. She invited His neighborhood friends and she served them chocolate ice cream. Later that day, Jesus walked down to the river with His friends where He came across a small black dog. Jesus named this dog, Buddy. And Buddy followed Jesus.”

Headline News

Commodity markets on cocoa beans are expected to fluctuate due to an unseasonably dry season that has all major Christian denominations scrambling for their share of the chocolate universally thought to have been given to Jesus in the Book of Nathan. The Holy Air force from the short haired black dog defense units bombed the chocolate processing center from the western Christian consortium. United Nation Peacekeepers were called into quell further escalations. The center of the controversy lies with the demand for chocolate ice cream for the annual Christmas celebration candle light services held worldwide.

The Spanish Church of the Holy Canine of Jesus Christ began its annual march from Spain to Italy commemorating the discovery of Jesus’ dog, the Buddy. Buddy’s descendants as recognized by the Spanish church are marched by the thousands day and night illustrating the dedication Jesus had as he walked his own dog every day. Riot police were called once the thousands of Spanish pilgrims marched through Southern France who also

laid claim to the original descendants of the holy dog, Buddy, however, the French dog has short wiry hair. Protestors clashed with the pilgrims over complaints of the mess and the religious implications of marching small black dogs hundreds of miles to Rome.

Would we really go to war over chocolate ice cream or the genetic lineage of a dog?

You bet we would.

I tend to think God knew exactly what He was doing when He led the construction of the Bible. We have all we need in the Bible and the basic knowledge of the ancient culture and history surrounding the people who lived during that time. Nothing is missing. And too much information would have driven us crazy.

Should we expect more when we ask, who is God?

When we ask who someone is, we never think that we have to **change** before we can accept the answer. Getting to know the nature of God requires that we change. And this is not something widely taught in Sunday school. We have to be ready and eager to change as we learn about God.

Why?

“I hate my brother because he is purple. I have hated purple people every day of my life. I grew up in a community that hated purple people. Purple people have actually been cruel to me and I now have plenty of reasons to hate all purple people.”

The Bible tells us that nature of God is love. We are commanded to love. And it is hard to argue against the fact that God made purple people. And then I have to contend with how God could ask me to love purple people.

I have to change my thinking. My point of view has to die.

If I just read the Bible is that enough? Yes and no. Yes, if you are able to read the Bible as it is written. No, if you read the Bible according to your traditions, cultures, political party, or historical point of view. In other words, God is not a Republican or a Democrat. He isn't African, Asian,

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Hispanic, Indian, or European. He is not a Catholic or Protestant. Nor is He an American. He is everything. God is God.

And if you are really pressed to give God a racial distinction, then He is Jewish - a Jewish rabbi from the Near East to be more specific. And that doesn't really tell us much about who He is.

Remember, our western culture is all about the details and judgment. We consider 'knowing' and 'passing judgment' as prerequisites to belief. Knowing the unimportant detail and relishing in the gossip is how we generally get to know someone or some product.

Tell me everything about this new brand of shoe and let me judge. I will decide if I like it. I will decide if this is correct, if it fits me, if the color makes my eyes pop. Tweet me and friend me, and I will decide if you are cool enough to follow.

'I Decide' is challenging our monetary motto, 'In God We Trust'

Any type of analysis is not going to happen with God. We will never sit in judgment of Him because we are simply too insignificant. By studying the Bible, we are forced to deal with the nature of God. And His nature tells us two things.

Listen and obey.

This is where the answer lies to knowing God. It has nothing to do with our western view of passing judgment based on information. Knowing God has everything to do with simply having faith in what He has said and taking action. Even if that action makes no sense at the time, like loving purple people.

Remember that, "Faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see." (Hebrews 11.1) In other words, we have to have faith to accept what God tells us.

And by listening and obeying, we are guaranteed to change. And by changing, we will come to know God.

"I AM who I AM." - Exodus 3:14

7 FILL IN THE BLANKS

The selected students filed into the classroom looking around at their new environment. The room was a basic college classroom with tables and chairs facing the front of the class where a professor would normally lecture although no one was there to greet them that day. There was nothing on the walls which were painted a glossy white. Most of the students had shown up early for the test. Each student been notified of the time and location for the test by mail, email, text, phone, courier who demanded a signature, the mayor of the town, the governor, congress woman, and finally, the President of the United States visited each one personally expressing the importance of the upcoming test.

On morning of the test, military helicopters and jets secured the air space over the community. Armed federal agents escorted each student to the test site while city police officers stopped traffic along the route in order to ensure that the each student had plenty of time to get to the classroom. It was obvious that the test was important but no one knew any details.

Only the students entered the classroom and as they took a seat, they began to question each other. No one had a similar background. The ages ranged from six years old to one gentleman who was ninety nine. Men and women. Boys and girls. All races, all sizes, all backgrounds. The students could not determine the factor linking them together. Maybe they were selected randomly.

A small non-descript man in a white coat quickly stepped in from a side door. He said nothing but smiled as he ignored all questions. A thick white binder was set before the student. When every student had a test, the man stepped out of the same door he had entered.

Everyone opened the binder to find the following instructions on page one.

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Life Test Instructions

1. Fill in the blanks
2. Take as much time as you would like
3. This is an open book text
 - a. Consult anyone that you wish
 - b. You may refer to any book, document, or video
4. You will not be given a time limit. The test can end at any time and without warning
5. This test will be collected at the end of your life

No one spoke except the ten year old name Brianna who had turned to page two.

“I know this answer,” Brianna exclaimed, “Who is Jesus? He saved me.”

“We are all Christians,” the ninety nine year old man said as he looked around to confirm his hypothesis. Everyone nodded in agreement.

Flipping through the test, the questions were easy to read but difficult to answer. Together, they tried question fifty-five, “What is love?”

Then they tried question six hundred and seventeen, “What is forgiveness?”

After several minutes, it became clear that they would not be able to answer these questions based on what they knew walking into the classroom. At that moment, the doors opened and the students took their test and left.

Each student spent the rest of their lives taking the test and none of them ever knew when the test would end.

This is a very scary opportunity for us as Christians in the United States. We love to fill in the blanks. And we do this all the time without being aware. I blame elementary school, the land of fill-in-the-blank tests. A place where one can move onto the next level by filling in the blank. And a perfect score is not required to advance.

Except that this methodology does not work with God. He expects that we understand the answers to His questions. He has even given us a book to look them up and I think that He wants us to commit the answers to memory so that we can actually act upon them.

Here is a good example, what is love?

If this question surfaces images of Hallmark card greetings, red heart candy, and small cupids shooting arrows then your answer is going to be

wrong. If you think you already know the answer because people say you are 'just a loving person' then your answer is going to be wrong. Or if you say 'I am in love and the state of being in love' is the answer, then no. Try again.

We are not entitled to fill in the blanks. There are answers but these answers require that we change how we think.

Knowing God is about listening and obeying Him. This entails refraining from busily assuming what we know is the truth.

May we come to understand that we are challenged to struggle with the truth that is found in His word. And through that struggle, we will pass the test.

To find the answer to 'What is Love?', check out 1 Corinthians 13:4 and go from there.

Life is God's novel. Let him write it. – Isaac Bashevis Singer

8 LISTENING

Elle crawled out of her red tent that was nestled on the side of a great mountain. In front of her lay the frozen expanse of Alaska. She had not eaten in three days and the juice and protein powder mixed with water was no longer curbing her appetite. Her stomach ached. The vast snow covered wilderness stood before her in silent patience waiting for Elle to connect with the Holy Father. Under the clear blue sky of the morning, Elle looked down into the valley and at the mountain range that lay miles in the distance. She knelt as the snow crunched beneath her snow pants. She prayed. Her arms cramped as she bowed her head. Elle could hear her heart beating and the slowness of her breath. She felt a soft breeze pass by. A cloud shifted under the sunlight. Slowly, Elle felt God's presence as her mind stopped struggling, she let her thoughts, worries, and wonders fall away. Elle finally heard the still small voice of God.



Listening to God is less about reading the Bible and obeying His word than it is about being willing to listen. Getting outside of yourself takes effort and practice. Shutting down your mind, letting go of the worries that shout inside your skull demands focused effort.

The United States is very unlike ancient Israel where Jesus taught. When Jesus was growing up, taking time for God was an community expectation. In fact, there were several points in the year where the entire village or town would come together and celebrate. These ancient Jewish celebrations are nothing like our Christmas celebrations. Most of us get together two times a year, go to a church service or mass, exchange a few gifts, or go out in the backyard to find Easter eggs. Comparing our Christian celebrations in the

United States to how the ancient Hebrews recognized God is laughable.

Ancient Hebrews actually killed animals to purify themselves of sin, worked for weeks in preparation for celebrations that lasted days. The Holy Scriptures were read aloud in the local temple where attendance was mandatory, and everyone ensured that they did their best to follow rabbinic law. It wasn't a matter of choice; it was a matter of social responsibility. And we have to recognize that as Christians it is our social responsibility to listen to God.

Where do we start?

First we have to admit to ourselves that going to church is not the same thing as spending quality time with God. We go to church to worship Him as the body of Christ as He is entitled. We also see our friends, sing songs, and spend time thinking about the homily or sermon. God does speak to us while we assemble on Sunday except that we need one on one time.

I suggest a God date. Solitude. Quality time. We can learn from the examples that Jesus left behind in scripture.

Matthew 26:36, "Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, "Sit here while I go over there and pray."

Mark 1:35, "Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed."

Luke 6:12, "One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God."

I have never met a Christian who went to the mountain side to pray all night. I think I would like to make a friend who does.

I live in Kansas and there are no mountains. Instead, I wake up every morning and go to my solitary living room to pray. And I do not do this because I am special or holy, I do this because people of faith taught me to pray and I had the courage to try.

'Try' is the word. 'Try' is the best we can ever do. And getting up before my day starts is very trying.

I set the alarm and when that thing goes off, it takes everything I can do to ignore the voice that tells me that I should hit snooze. I grab a blanket and go downstairs in the dark. I put the blanket over my head and I sit on the couch. The blanket reminds me of those rabbis I have seen on TV, I doubt it means much to God but somehow it helps me relate to Jesus.

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Sitting there in the dark with a blanket over my head, I pray for everyone I know by the state they live in. It takes two hours to get through the entire list. And sometimes I never get out of the state of Kansas.

Occasionally. I only pray for ten minutes and I sing softly, a simple hymn or the Christian doxology. I basically thank God for who He is.

And then I imagine myself sitting at the feet of God and I enjoy the moment. I feel peace. And I struggle because my body and my mind are telling me that sleeping would be better. Overtime, I have less of a struggle but the struggle remains. And it is during these moments where I feel that peace is when I can hear from God.

And I listen.

Yes, I am at peace. And yes, the message is difficult at times. He takes me to places or surfaces memories that I do not wish to see. And it is here that I have to continue to listen. There have been times when God has shown me where I have been unloving. And that hurts. Other times, I can finally see a lifelong habit and I see my selfishness. Or I see where I failed as a father. Or I see where God was protecting me from myself. Or maybe I can see my neighbor in a new way that ushers in patience.

Sometimes I laugh. And sometimes I cry.

God holds me and He tells me that He loves me. And He tells that we have work to do together. Sometimes He gives me an assignment like the time that I had to pray for this person I hardly knew. That assignment lasted for well over a year. Another time He told me to forgive and we argued.

I thought I had a good point and I was entitled to hate one of God's children. God is patient and He is never wrong. So if you are inclined to argue with God, stop wasting your time. But then again, I have wasted years of my life arguing with God. I have read the Old Testament and find some measure of assurance when I see examples of people arguing with God, Jonah being a good example. And then I pull myself together and begin to listen again.

Remember that listening to God is a basic tenet to our faith. Jesus died to give us this right. We can approach God boldly and we now have the right to listen to God.

May we be humble enough to be obedient, honest enough in our brokenness to be healed, and strong enough to set aside time to listen.

9 SPORTS

Jerry, Jorge, Tyrone, and Larry sat around their favorite table at the sports bar. They were surprised that they even had a chance at this table since the bar was usually packed on game days. Today seemed different somehow. Television screens were showing the game commercial free. As the men laughed with each other before they noticed chicken wings and a platter of cheeses fries were sitting on the table.

An Old Man sat down and smiled. Every other table in the bar was empty. Although it was odd, no one seemed to mind. Jerry smiled in return.

“Ok, Old Man. Join us. Plenty of food to go around,” Jerry said and turned his attention back to the game.

The Old Man smiled and nodded.

As the men ate and watched the game, more food appeared but no one seemed to notice. The men were talking about the game, stats, sports history, former coaches, and predictions of the next great play.

The game went on and on with the score increasing every play. Silence grew as the game continued and the friends look at one another wondering what was happening. More food was on the table and a fresh pitcher of water sat in the middle.

“Where did this food and water come from?” Jerry asked. No one knew.

“What about this game, did you ever see players like this before. I don’t even know who they are,” Larry said looking at Jerry.

“I have never seen a coach like that, better than the old school guys,” Tyrone commented.

“Hey, old man. Who are you?” Jorge asked.

“Good question,” the Old Man said as the game ended. He stretched as he continued to watch His children.

The Parable of the Fish

“Do I know you?” Jerry asked trying to remember where he had seen this familiar face.

“Yeah, I know you,” Tyrone said as Jorge and Larry nodded their heads in agreement. The Old Man was very familiar but they knew nothing about him.

“Hey, how did we get here?” Jorge asked looking around. The bar was still empty.

“Your bodies died,” the Old Man said softly.

The friends looked at one another. They looked around the bar and noticed that there were no doors and there was nobody else in the bar.

And then they started to remember parts of their mission. They were on patrol someplace far from home and Jorge stepped on something. An unbelievably loud noise erupted from the ground and then they were sitting in the bar.

“You’re God,” Tyrone said in amazement.

God nodded watching His children intently as they slowly woke up.

“We’re dead?” Jerry asked looking at his hands.

God nodded again.

“Are we in heaven?”

“Not yet,” God said, “you guys know next to nothing about me. And before you move on, and you will, I have to fill you in on a few things. Or it would be too much of a shock.”

“You are God. The God?”

God nodded sadly.

“Why a sports bar?” Larry asked looking around.

“Because this all that you guys know. This is where your heart lies and I wanted you to be comfortable while I taught you about the life to come,” God said looking sadly at His four children who began to look scared.

“Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test?” 2 Corinthians 13

If you know more about a sports team than you do about God you

might want to question your commitment. If your most coveted thought is about worldly goals or secular knowledge and it drives your every action, reconsider how you are spending your time.

Remember, you cannot love someone you do not know.

13 BASIC COMMANDS

The classroom leader shouted, “Attention on deck!”, as God entered the classroom. The students stood at attention until God took his seat behind the massive marble desk at the front of the classroom. No one moved.

“At ease,” God said. The students relaxed. Turning to the classroom leader, God said, “Have the students be seated.”

“Yes, Sir!” The classroom leader shouted and he smartly turned to the students who remained at ease and he shouted, “Class! Seats!”

All the students sat in unison.

“Good morning, class,” God said with a smile.

“Good morning, God!” The students shouted back.

“Today we will be discussing the basic commands. Did everyone read Matthew, Chapter 22?”

“Sir, yes Sir!” The class shouted back in unison.

“Ok, very good. The lecture will now begin.”

All the students opened their notebooks as God stood and went to the white board and wrote.

“‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’

This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

After writing the basic commands on the board, God continued, “Everything you do, every moment of your life must be founded on these basic commands. All scripture is built upon it.”

“Are there any questions?”

“No, Sir!” The class shouted in unison.

“Class leader,” God said, “Dismiss the class, this lecture is over.”

“Sir, yes Sir! Class! Attention on deck!” The class stood.

“Class dismissed!”

All of the students ran to the front to get a hug from God before leaving.



Nothing God says is optional.

When God says, ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind’, he means it. And when he says, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’, he is not asking you for your opinion on the matter. It is an order. As Christians, these are our basic commands.

And that is so difficult in our modern culture. We tend to hold the individual higher than the community. Natively, we believe that the individual can decide what is best for himself or herself. With God, this is not so. He knows best.

“but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.” 2 Corinthians 3.17

So in one sense, we have to obey. And in another, we are freed by doing so.

Your mind works very simply: you are either trying to find out what are God’s laws in order to follow them; or you are trying to outsmart Him. – Martin H. Fischer

May we strive to obey even when we do not understand.

11 WEALTH

Jesus was waiting for Lenard.

As Lenard stepped into view, Jesus approached him with a smile. Lenard stared at Jesus while he adjusted to his new mind, one that no longer held the knowledge of good and evil. Lenard smiled back as he recognized his savior. They embraced.

Looking around, Lenard took in the beauty that was all around him. The sky was as the finest jewel sparkling over the earth. A garden surrounded by wild flowers waved at the sunlight. Jesus took his hand and led him toward a great silver door. Lenard leaned on Jesus overwhelmed by the flood of new sensations and colors that his new immortal body absorbed. The world was never so beautiful, so clear.

Jesus laughed and said, “Lenard, we can look at the flowers later. We have time. For now, you must attend to your wealth.”

Lenard looked surprised at the silver door. Its surface was smooth and glassy to touch. Lenard looked at his face neatly reflected on the smooth surface. His scars were gone and his nose no longer had that dent from a childhood injury.

“Jesus,” Lenard said, “I was very poor when I died. I didn’t have much in life. I had a good life and did my best but money or wealth wasn’t in the picture. So I am not sure what is supposed to be behind that door. It probably belongs to someone else.”

Jesus nodded with a smile on his face. “It’s ok. Trust me, Lenard. You died a wealthy man.”

The door opened into a great banquet hall filled with hundreds of round tables where people sat eating and having pleasant conversations. A crowd was apparently waiting by the silver door, approached Jesus and Lenard quickly.

A tall man walked right up to Lenard and gave him a hug but wouldn’t

let go. Others patted Lenard on the shoulder as the tall man began to cry. Lenard stepped back and stared at the man who looked familiar.

“You are my friend, Lenard.” The tall man said as Lenard recognized James. James was a mentally retarded man that Lenard employed for years as his family’s gardener. Mainly because James didn’t have anything to do and he was alone, so Lenard and his family watched over him. James had an easy job since most of the yard was dirt but James always did a good job raking it clean every morning. They paid him what they could and fed him on most nights until James died a decade ago.

Two gang members were standing behind James smiling at Lenard, Tony and his brother Frank. They hugged Lenard. Lenard had once stopped his car and confronted the entire gang. He had yelled at them saying that God loved them and that their life didn’t have to be this way. God had more for them than a short life on the block. Lenard had never heard from them until now. Many others were there to greet Lenard. Old friends who witnessed Christ in Lenard’s life, neighbors who quietly accepted Lenard’s help over the years when the economy was really bad in the neighborhood, and other people who Lenard had never met stood around him. Over the years Lenard had sent money to outreach ministries in countries Lenard knew he would never get to see. His money helped the missionaries tell them about God before they were all massacred. Lenard cried as he was overwhelmed with the love he felt. Jesus placed his hand on his shoulder and gave Lenard a hug.

“Welcome home.” Jesus said.

“I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven.” Then He warned the disciples that they should tell no one that He was the Christ.” Matthew 16.18-20

As Christians, members of the church that Peter was ordained to build, what we bind here is bound in heaven. Strange concept if you think in human, physical terms. What could we possibly bind here that is so everlasting that it remains in heaven, a place of perfection, purity, and everlasting? Whatever it is must be important for God to say that.

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust

The Parable of the Fish

destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Matthew 6.19-20

As modern Americans we simply miss the point. You will love what you treasure. Treasure what?

Today, wealth means money in the bank and the power and privilege it brings. This type of wealth is easy for us to understand because we can see it every day. If we are hungry, we go to the store and buy something. Water comes to us from the faucet. We have electricity and gas to condition the climate in our homes. Modern medicine eases our suffering. This is an unusual era in human history - we live in unusual times. We are so accustomed wealth; historians tell us humans have never had so much available to them. And this is clouding our understanding of God and standing in the way of intimacy with Him.

In God’s world, the real world, love is the ultimate currency. There is nothing else. The loving relationships you cultivate are the only things you take with you - they will not rust or be stolen. The love we show through the grace of God is bound in heaven. How we love, as Jesus loves, is treasure. Our relationships, how we treat our neighbors, is what follows us into heaven and in my opinion, waits to meet us when we arrive in heaven.

May we come to see that God has given us the opportunity to build great wealth for Him. Through love in Christ’s name, we build something that can never fade. And when we enter into union with God at the end of this life, may you find yourself wealthy for eternity.

12 THE KEY

The team of explorers entered the treasure chamber deep within the ancient castle. Years of surveys, and months of digging had lead to this legendary find. Except that the castle was buried within a mountain and the land had shifted overtime making the entire structure unstable. Several tunnels had collapsed and the team was now racing to find an exit.

“What now!” Antonio shouted as he entered the treasure chamber. The great hall was lined with ornate sculptures of kings long since dead. Scrolls were neatly arranged in wooden bookcases. Ancient weapons hung from the walls and maps lay on the tables. A three foot golden key hung on the far wall beside a large metal door with a large key slot in the center. A treasure trove of history artifacts lay before the team but none of that mattered now.

The floor buckled and everyone fell to the floor.

“What was that!” Antonio screamed as Chloe grabbed a hold of his jacket and gave him a quick shake stopping to panic attack that was taking over him.

“We are in the treasure chamber,” Chloe said calmly as she could. “We made it his far. And no one has died yet.”

Antonio nodded as he began to relax a bit.

“The ground beneath us is shifting, we should be ok for a while,” Daniel said lying to his friends. They accepted the false hope but each one kept a wary eye on the floor that desired to swallow them up at any moment.

“There is supposed to be a door on the far end of the room that leads outside, their greatest treasure. All we have to do it to find the key.”

“An exit was their greatest treasure? No wonder they all died.”

“Have you seen any bodies, Antonio? We have been stuck down here for two weeks and not one corpse. I think everyone got out and now we need to find that key! And yes, at the moment, I think escape from death is the greatest treasure!” Chloe screamed as frustration overwhelmed her. She wiped at the grim on her face.

The Parable of the Fish

“Ok, everyone focus, we are almost out of here,” Antonio said standing in front of the door. The three foot golden key hung on the wall beside the door.

“First, someone tell me what a key is? The key to our freedom?” Antonio asked as the floor swayed sending brick falling downward.

“How should I know? You’re the team lead!” Chloe shouted as she started to cry. They had run out of food two days ago and there was only a canteen of water left for twelve people.

“I don’t know what a key is! I have only read about it!” Daniel said sitting down underneath the three foot golden key with his back to the wall.

The rest of team had no idea what a key was but without a word they began tearing the room apart. Smashing pottery, ripping through the scrolls, pulling the ancient weapons off the walls, the more they searched the stronger the panic set in.

Daniel stood up hitting his head on the key. “What’s this thing?”

“No idea. Try it,” Antonio said.

With Chloe’s help, Daniel inserted the key into the key hole and the door opened.

There is a key in the Bible. And it is bright, obvious, and Jesus talked about it again and again. Love.

It is the key to freedom; it will open the door so you can escape. When we read that God is love and we do not understand what love is, then what have we really learned?

Can we even hope to understand the scriptures if we do not know what ‘love’ is? Maybe. Our chances vastly improve when we understand that we have to learn about love.

In the book of John, Chapter 13, Jesus said to his disciples, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

May we see that without love, we cannot do the Lord’s work. And without knowing what love is, we cannot hope to understand what the Lord says. Give us the grace to learn about love and the strength to show the world the love that it so desperately desires.

13 LOTTERY OR LOVE

Brianna walked into the massive lobby of the Lottery headquarters. In her hand was the winning ticket. A broad smile pushed against her cheeks and she had a swagger to her stride. She had quit her job that afternoon but she kept her notification pleasant. Her manager was no gem but at the very least, Brianna thought, she could be nice about her resignation. And now here she was, ten feet from the conference room where she would sign papers and change her life forever.

The room wasn't exactly what Brianna had been expecting. A maroon shag carpet looked ten years past its prime covered the floor. In the middle of the room sat a chipped and dented wooden executive conference table that seated twelve. The leather chairs were faded and stretched from use. Brianna shrugged as she sat down to wait. She was early for the next part of his life.

No more than three minutes later, the Lottery commissioner and his staff entered the room. The Lottery commissioner was an unusual man. His long thin black mustache actually circled back and almost touched his nose. Black curly hair clung to the sides of his head making two bulbous cones that resembled rounded horns. Ben sighed, it takes all kinds of characters to run the world, he thought.

After a series of congratulations and handshakes, everyone took a seat.

"Brianna, let us get down to business. As the winner of this Lottery, we have a few papers for you to sign. A couple conditions that need to be honored."

"Ok." Brianna said wondering if she should have brought an attorney with her.

"It's simple. You get to have as much money as you wish, anytime you wish, for as long as you live."

"Wow! That is better than I had thought!"

“I thought so,” the Lottery Commissioner said dryly.

“All this is yours,” he continued pushing a contract toward Ben with a frozen smile, “except love.”

Brianna was reaching for the contract when she stopped. “What did you say?”

“You can have all the money in the world but you cannot have love. That is the way it works.”

Brianna stared at the papers in front of her. She slowly stood up and said, “No, thank you.”

Without another word, Brianna left the Lottery Commissioner and his staff behind thankful that she was pleasant to his former manager. She needed her job back.

We are numb to the fact that we need love. And most of us probably don’t understand why Brianna left the table as fast as she did. We don’t want love, we need it. Without Love, we will die. Literally. There are so many songs in popular culture that speak to this one truth except most do not take time to realize it. Love is such a profound requirement for humans that I am surprised that Love is not a subject in the public schools. And without Love, people do very strange and destructive things to fill that void.

The Bible tells us that we are made to Love God. We were designed to worship Him. It is what we are. We are meant to love and be loved. Except that this seems to be the biggest secret of all.

When asked, ‘What do you do for a living?’ No one says, “I live for love.”

Did you know that in John 3.16, it says, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only son, that whoever believes in Him will not perish but will have ever lasting life.”

Was God simply watching television up in heaven and said to himself, “Hey, I think I will go and die for my children so they can live. It’s a commercial break.”

There wasn’t anything more important than His love for us. Nothing was more important to God. Believe me, if you are going to die for something, it has to be important. Many people look at the salvation aspect of the John 3.16 but what I don’t understand is how we got this far as

Christians and missed that love aspect of this verse.

He loved us enough to die. Because if that wasn't the case, the verse could have read, "For God so cared about humans that he gave them all a million dollars and good health." He didn't give us material gifts. He gave Himself. He loves us.

And we need to understand that so everything else will start to make sense.

14 THE DATE

The Father sat at a large circular table draped with a white table cloth. He sipped on his ice tea watching the traffic slowly drive by and at the people walking past Him on the sidewalk lost in their thoughts. It was a lovely spring day to be sitting outside. The café was busy and nearly every table was full of people having brunch.

The Father stood smiling as His children approached. He hugged each one as they sat down around the table.

“How have you been?” He asked.

“Fine, let’s eat. I really have to go soon. I am meeting Margie and my other friends for lunch.” Susan said with a bright smile.

“Alfredo, I have not seen or heard from you in a while, where have you been?” The Father asked as Susan was busy drinking her water and eating her bread. She was no longer speaking with Him.

“Oh, I really didn’t feel like coming to see you the last three weeks,” Alfredo said with a yawn not even paying attention to the hurt in His Father’s eyes.

“You haven’t even called me. Or made time to even stop by during the week,” The Father said.

“Yeah, busy at work. Let’s eat,” Alfredo said bored with the conversation as he picked up a glass of water and began to eat his bread.

The other children had little to say as they ate. The Father ate in silence watching His precious children sit at His table and dine with Him. Once the

meal was done, the children got up and left. With only a few promising to “do this again soon!”

The Father sat alone at His table watching the traffic go by.



You have to know someone to love someone. Do you know God?

How many of us treat God as if we were casually dating? It’s an interesting relationship but I am not ready to commit. I appreciate the whole cross thing but this relationship just doesn’t fit into my life at the moment. And I am not in love, really. I have to be sure before I can say, ‘I love you, God’.

How would you feel if you died to save to your children and they have to think about whether or not they have time for you? What if the people you love the most only show up once a week because they feel obligated? And they won’t even bother to call or send you an occasional text throughout the week.

Having a relationship with God is an every moment thing. It is precious.

What we are is God’s gift to us. What we become is our gift to God. – Eleanor Powell

May we see that going to church is simply a worship event that we share with the community of believers and not the only time to have a relationship with our Holy Father.

15 AIR

Sarah opened her eyes as the soft red light blinked. A sharp automated voice announced through all speaks on the USS Exodus, a interplanetary cargo ship.

*Emergency Alert. Emergency alert.
Hull breach section eight.
Move toward emergency lock down now.
You have three minutes until zero atmosphere.*

The astronauts stripped away their bedding web that held them in place and vaulted themselves toward the other end of the berthing compartment. Allen reached the hatch first and turned the wheel opening the circular door. Sarah and Joyce were right behind him. The animated computer voice kept repeating the same message over and over again. Three minutes. Emergency lockdown area was fifty yards away through a series of hatches and on the far side of the lab. Sarah wanted to kick the engineers for that decision.

The hull did not breach in this section but time was running out as the red lights continued to flash meaning that air was escaping into the vacuum of space somewhere nearby. Announcements stopped midsentence as a loud groan shuddered through the floor.

“What do you think happened?” Allen said as they pushed themselves to the lockers where the space suits were stored.

“No idea.” Sarah said which worried her because as the lead engineer on this interplanetary tour, she was supposed to have the answers to everything.

“How much time do we have?” Joyce asked as the air canisters filled the suits with a protective layer of air. “Five minutes.” Sarah said pushing a

floating panel out of her way as she made her way to the other side of the galley. She wanted to look out the observation window.

The window told her what she feared the most. They would probably asphyxiate. On the other side of the door into the lab stood open space. And in the distance they could see a large asteroid rolling slowly over itself, glowing green and sparking orange rays from its center. That would have been an amazing scientific discovery, Sarah thought. Whatever it was melted the ship in half and dissolved the bridge.

“Ok,” Sarah said. “Ready?”

“Ready for what?” Joyce asked nervously.

“We have to jump for it!” Sarah said louder than she meant. She watched the other side of the Exodus ship slowly drift away with the emergency lockdown section, their only chance to live until a rescue ship came along. Sarah wondered if this was even going to work. Judging distance in space isn’t easy. It didn’t really matter, if they stayed they would run out of air and if they jumped and failed to reach the other side of the drifting space ship, they would still run out of air.

They opened the door and little atmosphere rushed past them turning white for an instant against the black backdrop of space. Joyce made the sign of the cross and jumped with arms stretched forward as if she were diving into a pool. Allen and Sarah jumped next. Sarah could only hear her breathing as she drifted through the openness toward her only chance at life. Her throat was dry and she was afraid to look at her oxygen levels.

“It’s pretty out here.” Sarah said as she took a moment to look around trying to distract her from the horror of free falling through the void. Space was much more beautiful when you are in it. The stars gleamed in multiple colors and the deep darkness in between was somehow comforting. As they drifted to the other side of the space craft, Sarah thought about her home and wondered if she would ever see it again.

They crashed into the exposed part of the mechanics bay grabbing a hold of the tables that were still attached to the floor. Using the lab equipment that was intentionally secured to the bulk head, they began frantically crawling with their hands, dragging their bodies through weightlessness, toward the hatch that had to open. It did. Pulling themselves in, Sarah quickly closed the hatch as Allen started the pressurization. As the air filled the small room, they began to cry with joy.

I understand that many Christians are familiar with the parables taught by Jesus. However, being ‘familiar with’ and ‘understanding the Word of God’ are different.

The Parable of the Fish

In the bible, we have a few parables that tell us about the Kingdom of God: The 'Parable of the Pearl of Value' or the 'Parable of the Treasure in the Field'. The problem I tend to face is that if I want a pearl of great value, I can go to the corner jewelry store and buy one on credit. And the last time I was in a field, I was chasing after an errant baseball. As a modern American, pearls and treasure hidden in fields mean very little.

What exactly is a pearl going to do for me?

For one, I doubt I will ever find one. And second, I am too comfortable to care. I have a job, a few credit cards with room on them, and a house that is climate controlled. Sure, life has its rough moments, but there isn't anything I really want except a winning lottery card - but even that desire doesn't motivate me to buy a ticket.

I find the most wonderful gifts from God are free and will kill us the fastest when we deny ourselves of them.

Air is a gift. Water is a gift.

So try holding your breath forever. Or go without water for a month. Trust me, start with air. It has a faster learning curve.

The Kingdom of God is like air to someone in space. Without it, death comes quick. To live without the Kingdom of God is madness. To think that anything is more important than air, is lunacy.

With this new appreciation for air, we can then apply it to our lives. We can start to see that our relationship with the Holy Father is precious. Praying is precious. Living our lives as God dictates is precious. Nothing else even comes close.

Apply this to every aspect of your life and watch what stays and what leaves. When love becomes your air and the things God considers worthy become your treasure, then you will experience the Kingdom of God.

Lord, give us the strength to chase after you. May we dig deep into the earth to find the treasure. May we run the race with barely a breath left in us at the finish line. May we hold the pearl of great value in our hands overjoyed with what we have in You.

Three Parables

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Matthew 13.44-50

16 AWARENESS

Eve drove down the road and came to a red light. She prayed. The traffic light turned green and Eve continued her drive to work. Someone pressed the brakes to slow down for school zone and the red brake lights came on. Eve prayed.

Turning onto the highway, Eve felt good about the time she was making and she saw a billboard with red car for sale. She prayed.

Pulling into the parking lot, Eve walked into the office and said hello to Elisa, her friend. Elisa was wearing a smart business suit with a red pendant on her lapel; Eve prayed. Eve felt pretty good as she walked into her office.

“Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” I Thessalonians 5.16-18.

As Christians, we need to anchor ourselves to God. This takes a bit of ingenuity as our days are filled with endless conversations, data, news feeds, and general business. Taking time to pray continually to God can be done but we will have to develop a sincere plan. I like the color red and I use it to remind myself to pray. Others pray every hour once they notice the time has changed. One friend of mine actually has his cell phone set to chime three times a day so he will pray.

Lord, help us stay anchored to you in adoration and in love. By your grace, we have been saved and honored to have the privilege to approach you boldly. Keep us close and guide our paths toward you.

17 THE OCEAN AND THE MATCH STICK

The ocean covers the world, shapes the world, and creates the weather over the world. Soft white caps tip over the occasional wave while winds feather the smooth waters. Beneath the surface, lay unfathomable depths.

Match sticks are small uptight creatures that tend to think highly of themselves. They haughtily believe they understand the ocean and everything else but matches do not realize that there isn't anything else beyond the ocean.

Match sticks believe that they need nothing else but themselves. Born to burn, a match finally discovers his predestined purpose and he instinctively lights himself on fire.

As the fire consumes him, the match is unsure if he is enjoying this experience although it is different, bright, and hot. The bright flame sputters on the top of his head as dark smoke drifts upward.

At once the match falls downward toward the ocean, he disappears without so much as a whisper or a hiss beneath the surface.



God and sin cannot coexist.

It is like expecting the ocean and a lit match to coexist. There are many references throughout scripture that point to the diametrically opposed relationship between God and sin.

As Christians, we take sin very seriously. Jesus died for our sins - he was humiliated, tortured, and crucified. It really is that dramatic. And I wonder if we have grown so accustomed to the hymns and scriptures that we have forgotten just how terrible God considers sin.

The Parable of the Fish

The Bible speaks of wrath and judgment, lakes of fire and destruction, fire and brimstone raining down from heaven. Not a lovely picture. Yet, this is how God sees sin. This is how He judges sin.

And we need to be very careful with our attitude toward sin.

Psalm 119. 9-11, “How can a young person stay on the path of purity? By living according to your word. I seek you with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands. I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.”

This is a very interesting verse, “...that I might not sin against you.” In other words, we can sin if we don’t know any better. And this is the truth as ugly as it is. There have been times in the beginning of my walk with Christ where I have been pretty self-righteous. It came naturally. I just knew better. I could just see the plank in everyone else’s eye. The Bible has taught me otherwise. And given our true nature, we need to stay as close to His word as we can. Amen.

18 THE SNARE

A small rabbit crept through the snow under the cover of night. In between bushes, tree trunks, and stones, he hid in the shadows. His nose was frantically working to detect the scent of any threat while his long ears stretched ready to hear approaching noises. Only the wind through the trees made a sound. Comfortable with his progress, the rabbit continued his adventures down the trail his father and mother had warned him against. This path was too exciting to resist; exotic foods too easy to reach. The rabbit had fallen into this forbidden routine and he liked it.

A strange sound cracked next him as his leg suddenly burned in pain.

Up, up, and up, the rabbit went. Too surprised to be cautious, he cried out a short, high pitched squeak. He felt himself flying for a moment and panic set in now that he was free falling back toward the icy ground. The snare wrapped around his leg snapped short his descent. The rabbit twirled above the ground by the snare as his leg throbbed in relentless pain.

He hung there in the darkness, in pain. The rabbit cried out but no one answered. He looked around in vain and saw nothing but darkness. He could no longer smell, the cool wind swept away any traces of the familiar or comfortable scents of his trail through the forest. He could not hear anything in this upside down position except the loud pounding of his heart as the blood rushed to his head.

In the morning, he would be seen, the rabbit lamented. Seen by all, friend and foe. His predicament would remove him forever from his family, his wife, and his children. In the morning, he would die.

And the rabbit was right. For in the morning, the hunter came along and found a dead rabbit, killed from the stress and the exposure. Without ceremony, the rabbit's body was tossed into a bag while the hunter reset the snare.

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.” Matthew 1.1-3

Choosing not to sin can be painful which is why it is called temptation. Imagine saying no to bread after fasting for forty days. Jesus stared directly into Satan’s eyes and said, No. And He suffered for His decision. He was still hungry and in pain and I am sure that turning stones into bread looked like a really good option at that moment.

And in the end, Jesus told Satan how much He loved God by quoting scripture. “It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.

We can ask ourselves, how much do I love God? Do I love Him enough to say no to bread after forty days in the wilderness?

Or do we as Christians even understand what we have to say no to in the first place?

How we view sin is often the road in how we deal with sin.

I know that a puppy will not kill me. Therefore, I will cuddle with a puppy.

I also happen to know that a baby rattlesnake can kill me. They are born venomous. So, with that in mind, I will not buy my child a baby rattlesnake for Christmas. I don’t care how cool or cute they are or that all the other kids are getting one this year. That just tells me that there will be a lot of kids in the hospital because kissing baby rattlesnakes is not a good idea, they bite. Therefore, I will not try and train my baby rattlesnake or sing it a lullaby, or give it a name and put it on a pillow next to me in bed. I will not negotiate with the snake – there is no point. In the end, the snake will try and kill me.

May we come to see that sin is to be respected like a snake. Let us cling to God and His word during any moment of doubt or duress. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil, Oh Lord.

Before things get out of hand in your life, here are a few hard won lessons that I have learned about the enemy. My hope is that they help you with your walk with God.

The veil.

The veil is a condition that prevents a person from seeing reality. Whether it is a satanic influence or basic human nature is not important. Simply knowing that this snare exists is what we should be focus upon. Sin flourishes under the veil and just because you see it wrapped around someone's head, doesn't mean that they see it or will even recognize the problem should you point it out to them.

Ever wonder why he keeps doing that? Can't she see that continuing to do that isn't working?

Pray for them.

And if you think you are free and clear, watch out. I personally believe that everyone has some form of spiritual blindness which is why I am an advocate of humbleness before our Christian brothers and sisters, and reverence in the face of God who still loves us even though we are so blind.

Recall that Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots (Luke 23.34). Jesus was crucified on the cross when he uttered those words.

I am certain that no one in the United State has jeered at someone hanging on a cross but we have all made fun of someone who could have used our love and kindness. It's the veil and it is the enemy's preferred weapon.

Remember the enemy's motto: "Why fight them when you can convince them to destroy themselves and others?"

Liars.

"My son lied to me," the man said weeping again. His wife held his hand and she looked at me in the eyes. The look that said, explain this to us. Their son started by using marijuana and progressed into another kind of drug. He robbed his parents, lied about it, and robbed them again the following week.

Being under the influence of sin, means that active lying is taking place.

The Parable of the Fish

Sin takes place in the presence of a lie and I believe that most people sin because they either believe the lie that they have been told or believe the lie that they have conjured up.

Forget trying to convince the person who is involved with sin that they are lying to themselves or you. If they knew that they were about to kiss a baby rattlesnake, they would have backed off by now. Just know that lying is part of the situation. Be truthful, clear, loving, and pray.

“I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.” (Matthew 10.16)

Eat it and die.

Of course sin is fun. It feels good. It tastes good. It looks good.

Why?

“I have discovered this principle of life—that when I want to do what is right, I inevitably do what is wrong. I love God’s law with all my heart. But there is another power within me that is at war with my mind. This power makes me a slave to the sin that is still within me. Oh, what a miserable person I am! Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death? Thank God! The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord. So you see how it is: In my mind I really want to obey God’s law, but because of my sinful nature I am a slave to sin.” (Romans 7.21-25)

Here we see a glimpse into the Apostle Paul’s life. He recognized the struggle that neatly sums it up for all of us. Like the adoration of chocolate covered poison. However, as modern self made Americans, we tend to minimize the danger of sin nonetheless.

A man once told me that he had an affair with his secretary. He was now divorced, his daughters will not speak to him, he embarrassed his parents and has not spoken to them at any length since, he lost his job over the affair, and the secretary left him because she was socially ostracized.

How many times have we heard that story line with its predictable ending?

How many television shows, movies, or books have covered this specific sin just for our entertainment?

And how many people out there continue on as if to say, that can’t happen to me. It just seems so right.

Sin does seem right. And at times, it seems so right that we cannot think of why the Bible says no.

And sometimes, we tell ourselves that this is really God's plan because somehow that Bible verse doesn't apply to me and it's ok to commit this sin. It is meant to be. (Notice that the lie and the veil work hand in hand)

I cannot think of a sin that ends well when taken to the extreme. And you will take it to the extreme, everyone who stays on the sin wagon does. It's just part of the ride.

For those of you, who disagree, why are there words like suicide, divorce, overdose, murder, and abortion? These terrible things happen and they happen enough that the dictionary people decided that the word should be listed for official purposes.

For those of you struggling right now, ask yourself, 'How much do I love God?' Do you love Him more than your need to disobey? Ask for help from others who are not in the middle of a battle. Let God minister to you through other Christians, do not go alone. The enemy loves that, the rogue Christian.

For a list of sins that will kill you check out Colossians 3.

"So put to death the sinful, earthly things lurking within you. Have nothing to do with sexual immorality, impurity, lust, and evil desires. Don't be greedy, for a greedy person is an idolater, worshipping the things of this world. Because of these sins, the anger of God is coming. You used to do these things when your life was still part of this world. But now is the time to get rid of anger, rage, malicious behavior, slander, and dirty language. Don't lie to each other, for you have stripped off your old sinful nature and all its wicked deeds. Put on your new nature, and be renewed as you learn to know your Creator and become like him. In this new life, it doesn't matter if you are a Jew or a Gentile, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbaric, uncivilized, slave, or free. Christ is all that matters, and he lives in all of us."

If we continue to believe that as Christians the enemy will not try to stop us from doing the Holy Fathers work, we are in for some very real disappointment.

It's war.

We cannot make peace with the enemy. We cannot hope that they might just ignore us when we cross paths. We will cross paths and it will not be pleasant.

The Parable of the Fish

Some tend to think that they have an option. If they simply ignore the enemy, he will go away. The government will provide for the orphan and the widow. Some other social program will cloth the naked and feed the hungry. Nothing will ever happen to me as long as I pray and attend church.

We cannot externalize this war. Battling sin will happen. Bad things will happen to good people and they will need our help. The battle will also occur in your mind, in your everyday routine, in your major life choices. If you think that by being a quiet Christian gets you out of active duty, think again. Jesus said, "In this world you will have trouble, but take heart, I have overcome the world."- John 16.33

A girl named Layla was being bullied at school. Everyone knew about Layla's treatment at school but it was easier to go along with it, ignore it, or look away. This happened until Maria, the new girl showed up at school. Maria told the bullies to back off. She told the teachers to get involved; she told the principle that this wasn't cool. Maria said that Layla needed love because Jesus said to love your neighbors as yourself. The aggressive bullying morphed into a passive aggressive isolation. Susie and Layla were alienated. No one made friends with Maria. Layla, who is developmentally slow, really couldn't connect with Maria. Maria was alone.

That story sucks!

Where is the storybook ending of Maria being heralded as the heroine? How come she did what Jesus asked and in the end she suffered for it?

What is the point?

My answer is this: Jesus saved all of humanity from sure death but we don't see him celebrated internationally. And like the example He set, we are ordered to do our duty for the glory of God in the face of fierce resistance. Turning the other cheek takes effort and you won't get a medal here on earth.

When God speaks, oftentimes His voice will call for an act of courage on our part. - Charles Stanley

19 RUNNING FROM GOD POEM

See Tom run. Run, Tom run.
See Jane run. Run, Jane run.

Love, God says. Forgive, God says.
No, says Tom.
No, says Jane.

See Tom run. Run, Tom, run.
See Jane run. Run, Jane, run.

Run away from God, Tom.
Run, run, run.
Run away from God, Jane.
Run, run, run.

Tom is tired. Jane is tired.
They stop. They rest.

Rest, Tom, rest. Rest, Jane, rest.

God gives Tom water. Tom is happy.
God gives Jane water. Jane is happy.

Love, God says. Forgive, God says.
No, says Tom. No, says Jane.

See Tom run. Run, Tom, run.
See Jane run. Run, Jane, run.

The Parable of the Fish

Run away from God, Tom. Try, try, try.
Run away from God, Jane. Try, try, try.

I do not like to run, says Tom.
I do not like to run, says Jane.
Rest, says God.
Rest.

Tom loves. Tom forgives.
Jane loves. Jane forgives.

Tom and Jane rest.
Rest, rest, rest.

20 HOUSE RULES

The Manager sat in the lavish dressing room waiting patiently. Queen Glitter, the world famous rock star once known as Sandy Belton of Andover, Kansas, was still outside waving to her fans. Her fame and influence was so great that Queen Glitter had the idea of turning a jumbo jet into a flying concert hall that would be televised to the world on pay per view. The Manager was against the idea which she ignored. In fact, the Manager was ignored more and more these days.

The Manager was the one who taught her to sing, gave her the confidence that she needed to get through the first singing contest, and provided her with the lyrics to her earliest hits which stilled fueled her now faltering career.

Now the Manager sat alone in the dressing room waiting. Queen Glitter skipped into the room nude except for several strategically place flowers on her body. The Manager grimaced.

“Don’t say it. I don’t wanna hear.”

“Stop this now,” the Manager said solemnly. His voice was deep and strong and Queen Glitter felt inclined to obey.

“No, it’s going to be the best show ever! The world loves me, they deserve the best!”

“The world does not love you, my dear child. I love you.” There was a time when she would love to hear the Manager call her His child but not anymore. She loved the world more.

“I am going on stage before takeoff to warm up. You coming?”

The Manager did not reply, he simply walked out of the dressing room in the airplane, down the stair case to the runway, through the crowds of drunk gawkers and He never looked back.

The Parable of the Fish

The show started at thirty thousand feet with two hundred fans packed into small seats around a simple stage. Millions tuned in via satellite. Song after song, Queen Glitter sang, danced, and twirled around. At the end of the final song, the bay doors opened at the center of the stage and Queen Glitter jumped off the airplane to her death followed by her band.

And the crowd went wild.



Hollywood is not a Christian's friend. The entertainment industry only entertains one spirit and that is the one in charge, the prince of the air. Everyone else is cannon fodder. The trail of broken families, deaths, shattered minds, and acts of lunacy circle this industry like a plague. While I am not advocating a ban on all movies, television shows, or commercials, I do wish to point out that any industry that thumbs its nose at the house rules laid down by God should be handled with considerable suspicion and caution.

And we should also keep in mind that God is not with us when we choose sin over Him. It is a heart breaking fact that scripture points out time and time again.

May we learn from the examples provided by the Holy Scriptures.

Samson.

Saul.

Ahab.

The tribes of Israel.

The tribe of Judah.

21 THE RANK STORE

The Rank Store on the corner of Main Street and 1st Avenue is open twenty two hours a day. Large ceramic planters overflowing with flowers line the walk way to the golden calf sitting in front of the golden doors. In the shiny display windows stand dark shelves where the most popular ranks are displayed: General, Admiral, Queen, President, Senator, Pastor, Prophet, Cheer Captain, Quarter back, Thug, along with dozens of others.

Each rank comes in a colorful plastic box with a certificate of authenticity. Posters with happy people looking important and proud hang from the white drop ceiling. On the shelves, one will also find pride, importance, and convenience for a high price. The store closes from 4am to 6am so that a cleaning crew can quickly buff the floors, dust, and refresh the inventory. And a line of customers stretches down the block greets the first shift workers every day as they reopen the doors.

Getting into the store is tricky. Usually one has to pay an entrance fee that varies from person to person with no real logic behind the various door charge. Sometimes the door charge is so high that a patron is turned away. And one has to be of great importance which causes problems because no one can explain what importance really is and there are daily shoving matches as frustration mounts at the foot of the golden front doors.

Across the street lives Jesus.

He has a simple home with a small but well manicured front lawn with comfortable but well worn lawn furniture sitting on a wide front porch. His front door is always open. Jesus is usually in the kitchen cooking or baking when he is not tending to his garden. And he always has fresh baked cookies for the children who love to hang out around his house or on the

The Parable of the Fish

play set in the back yard he built by hand.

Jesus offers everyone who comes to visit living water in beautiful hand crafted crystal glasses. No one ever leaves Jesus' house without a glass and everyone feels refreshed by the visit. There is never a line at His door. And there is always room at His kitchen table. In fact, on most days, no one above the age of nine ever stops by. His big days are on Christmas and Easter where most people stop short of the driveway, look in, and leave without even waving hello.

When asked why He rarely gets any visitors, Jesus always smiles and replies, "I never turn anyone away."

22 DEATH

Bequi looked at Jesus and asked, “Am I dead?”

“Do you feel dead?”

Bequi smiled, “No.”

They hugged each other as Jesus held her hand and led her into Heaven.

I understand that the word ‘death’ is a normal word in the English language. It is culturally acceptable to say that someone is dead. As Christians, this word has no bearing on us. We do not die. Once we accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, we become the immortal children of God.

“You don't have a soul. You are a Soul. You have a body.” C.S. Lewis

Is death the last step? No, it is the final awakening. – Sir Walter Scott

23 LIFE INSURANCE POLICY

The waiting room was unusual. Pictures of heaven hung in slim dark frames on the white walls. Long leather benches sat empty along the far side of the rectangular room. A reception window stood empty. Silence waited patiently as Tom and Sandy looked around. They had a complaint about their life insurance policy and they were not leaving until someone made restitution.

Tom headed toward the only option left, a single door with a gold door knob. He opened the door and Tom and his wife Sandy entered the room holding their thick life insurance file in their hands. They stood in a comfortable sitting room with an angel who sat in the corner on an overstuffed arm chair. He glowed from within as he read the newspaper staring intently at the article. His face held utter amazement as he slowly turned the page.

"Hello," Tom said strongly causing the angel to look at him. Sandy waved weakly.

"Yes?" the angel asked in a bored tone.

"We have a complaint about our life insurance policy. We have all the required paperwork," Tom said. Sandy stood next to him nodding her head adamantly.

The angel sighed rising to his feet and then floating to a desk along the wall. He sat lightly at the wooden chair behind the desk and motioned for Tom and Sandy to take a seat.

"You know that you two are dead back in the physical world, right?"

"Yes, but have a complaint," Tom answered quickly.

"You two must be from North America. Former US Citizens, right?"

"Why, yes we are Americans," Sandy said proudly.

"How did you know?" Tom asked.

"I have been seeing quite a few Americans lately. For a while, it was the

Europeans, and before them, the Prussians, then the Romans. They usually come from the country with the most wealth at the time.”

Tom didn’t know what to say about that as Sandy handed the angel their life insurance file. The angel politely took the file and set it before him. Opening the file, he quickly flipped through each page, pamphlet, DVD, magazine articles, online blog, church mission statement, doctrinal white papers, and theological declarations.

“You two have placed a lot of extra documents in this file,” The angel observed.

“It’s all in order,” Tom said pointed his finger at the file.

The angel smiled as he leaned back waiting for the conversation to begin.

“Listen,” Tom began, “we signed up for this insurance policy thirty years ago. And we are not satisfied with the outcome of this policy. We read the addendums and God has not fulfilled His side of the agreement.”

“Addendums?”

“Yes,” Tom answered defiantly.

“That’s new. You think you are authorized to add addendums to a commitment that has been signed in blood by the Holy Father?” The angel asked as he stared with wonder at Tom.

“Yes, we added a few over the years,” Tom answered weakly.

“What exactly are you unhappy with?” the angel asked now leaning back with his hands behind his head and staring at the ceiling.

“Is this boring you?” Sandy asked.

“No, I am simply disgusted. Now, please continue,” The angel said with a casual wave of his hand as he continued staring at the ceiling as he leaned the back of his head against the wall.

“Well, my son died when he was nineteen, a car accident. And I lost my business one year before retirement. I never got the chance to enjoy my golden years because I had to continue working a part time job at the local bank. And then I had the luck to land a job at our church balancing the books,” Tom said angrily.

“You had luck?” the angel said not expecting an answer. “Who do you think got you that job?”

“What about my retirement? I earned that money and deserved the right to enjoy my last days in comfort.”

“Tom, you don’t deserve anything. Besides, retirement on earth wasn’t promised.”

“And I got cancer which killed me before I had the opportunity to see my first grandchild graduate from college!” Sandy interrupted as tears ran down her face.

“You are immortal, Sandy. Your body died. And as promised, you will live forever with God.”

The angel pushed the file back across the table as he sat up and stretched.

“Open it,” the angel ordered. His voice was deep now and it shook Tom and Sandy. Tom opened the file.

“Where did you get this junk?” The angel asked quietly with a hint of sorrow as he watched Tom and Sandy intently. “Start pulling that garbage out. Now!”

Tom pulled out his church’s mission statement.

“Throw it away.”

And next were the various doctrinal documents and subsequent prayer lists that itemized every one of Tom and Sandy’s demands.

“Throw it away.”

Tom and Sandy obediently dropped them in the trash can next to the desk.

Pictures of their house, retirement plans, daughters and son, grandchildren, and friends were next.

“Throw them away.”

Sandy looked at Tom and he placed the photos in the trash can. The angel reached over and grabbed the rest of the pile and dropped into the trash can. There were now only two notes left. Tom and Sandy picked up the notes and held them for the first time. Each note was stained red.

“What is this?” Sandy whispered feeling the reverence of the note that she knew she had to read. Tom began to cry overwhelmed but not understanding why.

“Read it out loud. I need to be sure that you understand.” The angel commanded as he bowed his head.

Tom read his note aloud, “To my precious child, Tom. I have given my life so that you will have eternal life. By believing in me and living according to my Word, you have will have a place with me in the new kingdom. This policy is written in my blood and underwritten by God, the Father. I will love you forever. Jesus.”

”That is your life insurance policy. It has never changed. Do you understand now?” The angel said with a wave of his hand.

“What about my son?” Tom asked.

“Did he know Jesus?”

Tom nodded as he stared at his life insurance policy; he gently wiped his thumb across the letters. The letters flaked under his touch. The words were literally written in blood.

Tom and Sandy looked at one another and held hands.

“I am sorry,” Sandy said.

“Me too. I am sorry,” Tom added unable to look at the angel.

“It happens more often than you think.”

“How did you know we were Americans?” Tom asked.

The angel smiled at them. “Americans usually think that prosperity and health is what Jesus promised. It’s because you had so much in your past life. Now if you will go down the corridor and to the left, Jesus and your son are waiting for you.”

Definition:

- Restitution - Recompense for injury or loss.

24 JOY

The coffee shop was packed. Every table was occupied with people sharing conversation or staring intently at their laptop while they sipped their favorite beverage. A soft jazz tune played overhead neatly filling in the lulls of the people talking inside the shop. Two lines to the front door of patrons stood patiently waiting to make their order.

In line stood Samir and his wife Julia with their three children who held hands behind their parents amusing themselves with a simple song they learned at elementary school. The children were singing softly and giggling. It seemed like a day like no other until the soldiers kicked open the front doors. One of the glass doors hit a man standing in line with his newspaper and shattered. Before people started screaming, one soldier fired his weapon into the ceiling destroying the overhead speakers.

“Shut up and this will go easier! Make a noise and we will kill you!”

Samir and Julia grabbed their three children and huddled into a ball in the middle of the room as everyone else either stared or held their hands over their mouths trying to stifle their cries.

One by one the soldiers led everyone out of the coffee shop, around the corner and into waiting prison transportation buses. Julia was silently crying holding their youngest as Samir held his other two in his arms. His face did not betray the sickness in his stomach that was threatening to overpower his calm demeanor.

Once in front of the buses, the crying began. Men were directed to one bus, women to another, and the children to a third. A soldier grabbed the child out of Julia's hands and a struggle ensued. Four other soldiers stepped in and shoved Julia to the ground as another pointed a gun at the children Samir was holding in his arms.

A man stepped out of the crowd. “**Stop**”, he said softly and the soldiers lowered their weapons. Ignoring the man, the soldier continued processing the prisoners.

Samir was weeping quietly as they led him to the men's bus where shackles were placed on him. Julie was picked up and carried to the woman's bus as she sobbed.

Thirty minutes later, the prisoners were led down a dark alley and into a dirty warehouse where several men sat behind long wooden tables. The occasional cry interrupted the silent gathering. No one spoke. The coffee shop prisoners were reunited but separated into the groups imposed by the soldiers. The children clung to one another wide eyed with terror. Samir looked to find Julia but he could not see her among the other women who were looking longingly at the huddle of children who were now chained together.

The men behind the table stared at the coffee shop prisoners and said nothing. Finally, the oldest one at the end of the table slowly stood. He held everyone's attention and then said, "Bring them forward one by one and kill them."

"No!" many cried and pulled against the chains. People started struggling as the soldiers viciously kicked them back into place. The children wept uncontrollably now. Samir was unchained and dragged forward.

"Please, not in front of my children!"

A hard slap to his face was the response. The soldiers beat Samir for several moments. Punches fell and kicks landed, Samir cried as he curled up into a ball on the floor. Then the beating stopped. As Samir lay on the dirty ground listening to his broken breathing before the men behind the table. Samir heard footsteps.

"Why are you here?" the older man behind the table asked angrily.

Samir looked up and recognized the stranger from the parking lot. The stranger smiled gently down at Samir and then turned his gaze at the men behind the table. The older man sat down. One by one, each man looked at the table humbled by this stranger's gaze.

"Release them. These are my children."

The soldiers looked at the men behind the table who said nothing and then they looked at each other confused.

"I will take their place," the stranger said.

Without looking up, the old man behind the table said, "Agreed."

The soldiers quickly released everyone from their chains and shoved them out of the warehouse with haste. Samir who could not walk was carried by the soldiers and thrown out of the door. Julia and his children rushed to help him up as the rest of the coffee shop prisoners ran down the

alley and back into the arms of freedom.

Samir looked back into the warehouse as his family helped him stumble away to freedom. He saw the stranger placed in chains, beaten, and then quickly shot in the head.

We dodged a bullet.

There was no trial waiting for us, just an execution. We never stood a chance. No one was going to listen to our pleas. We had no appeal. We were all condemned, ready to be taken to the gates of hell at any moment.

Remember, we do not choose when we die, we choose if we will die.

And for this I feel a profound sense of relief and I cry when I think about how a stranger paid for my freedom. I did not know Jesus when He took my place. He was not welcome in my home when he made the soldiers remove my chains.

“But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.” Romans 5.8

It is a joy of relief, a joy of overwhelming gratitude, a joy that makes my heart leap as I will someday walk the streets of Zion. The chains of death have been broken, we have been released.

25 ASK

Maya and Timothy ran into the kitchen where God was making lunch. They both stood silent as God continued making sandwiches whistling a lively tune. The children looked at one another asking each other with their expression, who will go first? Neither said a word.

God set a plate of grilled cheese sandwiches on the table and smiled at his children.

“What’s the matter?” God asked knowing exactly what his children wanted.

Maya shrugged and Timothy stared at his feet.

God knelt before them opening his arms wide. Maya and Timothy wasted no time running into the embrace where they both buried their faces into his soft white shirt.

He held them both until their breathing calmed.

“What do you want?” God asked.

“I want a switch blade to find water,” Maya asked sweetly through her chapped lips. She had difficulty swallowing because her mouth was so dry.

“I need a stone to eat,” Timothy said as strongly as he could but his voice faltered because he had not eaten in two days.

“A switch blade? A stone?” God asked in surprise.

The children nodded earnestly convinced that a sharp blade and a dull rock would answer their deepest longings.

“How about lunch?” God suggested as he watched his children frown. He smiled and stood. “What you want is something to satisfy your needs. I have those things on the table for lunch and lunch is ready.”

Maya and Timothy stared at God trying to understand.

“I have cool water that will quench your thirst, Maya. You do not need a switch blade to find water. Timothy, a fresh grilled cheese sandwich will sit better in your belly than a stone.”

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God lead them to the table where the children sat down and ate. Together they had a pleasant afternoon enjoying each other's company and laughing throughout their conversation.

Jeremiah 29.10 is a popular verse that is often quoted about God's intentions for his children. "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

However, it is important to note that the Israelites had just been taken captive by the Babylonians, Jerusalem destroyed, and their country sacked. In the nine verses preceding verse ten, God is telling the Israelites to move on with their lives, marry, have children, and pray for the prosperity of their new Babylonian city. I am certain that this is not what the former people of Jerusalem were praying for. They wanted to go home, they wanted God to rain fire and brimstone down on the Babylonians, and they wanted to go back to how their former lives. Except that God does not hand out switch blades and stones to his children.

Sometimes we have to have faith that he has heard our prayers and while we may not understand the answer, His way is the best way.

Lord, help us to ask earnestly in your Son's name, Jesus, for the desires of your heart. Help us to accept life as it is and give us the strength to love as you do.

26 GOD'S WILL

Two farmers planted a crop in their field. Each farmer is a man of faith and he prays every day before sunrise. The days are long and hard. One crop needs rain, the other does not. For one crop to be successful, the other must fail. At the end of harvest, one farmer will rejoice while the other will wonder why did God not bless his crops.



Do the immediate results signify God's will? What you think about God's nature is a critical component of your faith. And it will serve as the backdrop to every event in your life whether good or bad.

In 1 Samuel Chapter 9, we find Saul and his father's servant looking for lost donkeys. This pair walks to three different towns looking for the missing donkeys. The world had space back then and plenty of it. And when donkeys got lost, there was no quick manner in which to find them. In fact, the first part of Chapter Nine focuses on the search for the donkeys and the search is taking them so long that Saul jokes that if they do not find the donkeys soon his father will start to worry about him.

Yet an odd thing happens along the way, after they have walked to three different towns and have been gone so long that they think about asking God.

At what point do we involve God in our lives?

The first thing in the morning?

After lunch?

The Parable of the Fish

Have we have spent so much time looking for donkeys that we throw in the towel and say, well at this point, it can't hurt to ask God?

Saul and the servant head to a local town looking for a prophet and it turns out that one is supposed to be there that day. How convenient. And this is where the story changes significantly. Samuel is a prophet of God and God has told Samuel that he will meet a man in this town that God has chosen to be king of Israel.

What just happened here?

Saul was already acting out God's will and he didn't know it. Looking for donkeys all over the country side was a part of God's will. God tells the prophet Samuel to expect Saul. Samuel knows about this plan before Saul does.

Looking for donkeys, end up the king.

Being a child of God means that you are already living His will whether you realize it or not. You are in God's will. And sometimes that plan is a bit boring, unexpected, and sometimes scary.

I believe that God's will goes unnoticed most of the time which is why we might even wonder about God's will. As if God's will is a destination, as if we have a choice as a Christian.

We should ask ourselves, are we even capable of understanding God's will?

There are verses in the Bible that says truly knowing God's will is beyond our reach. Ask Job.

"Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand (God to Job)." (Job 38.4)

"Have you ever given orders to the morning, or shown the dawn its place (God to Job)." (Job 38.12)

God is not condemning Job in Chapter 38 but He is making a good point. Personally, I have never even considered giving orders to the morning. I never knew that giving direction to the morning was an option much less considered it something that could be done. How much of 'God's will' just happens all around us all the time? How much of His will is unfathomable?

This thought makes my head hurt.

And if I cannot understand all the options then I am left to the basics.

In 1 John 4.12-16, we find the following, “No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. This is how we know that we live in Him and He in us: He has given us of His Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent His Son to be the Savior of the world. If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God. And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them.”

As Christians, “we know and rely on the love God has for us.” We are in God’s plan that is unfolding per His will. We cannot understand this state of being completely. We know that God is love and that His will includes that we love to one another. Love is, in and of itself, His will and that loving one another is the only way to respond.

May we see that staying in the love is best despite the outcome. Give us strength to leave judgment and fear aside as we place our faith in your will and that your will is that we love one another. Teach us to love.

We need not join the mad rush to purchase an earthly fallout shelter. God is our eternal fallout shelter. – Martin Luther King, Jr.

27 CHURCH SERVICE

In heaven, God smiled at everyone streaming into His church like a flood. Millions and millions of His children happily made their way into the Holy of Holies. Jesus stood down on the sanctuary floor to the right of the altar greeting people. The cathedral stretched to the sky with a windswept architecture naturally drawing in light from the heavens. Up every aisle people greeted one another as they took their seats waiting for the service to start. In the back the various bands and singers prepared themselves. Other placed flowers along the pews and up the staircases to the upper levels that overlooked the sanctuary.

God stood behind the altar that was on an elevated stage where everyone in the church would have a good view of Him. His white robes flowed beside him glittering as it caught the lights that floated around the cathedral.

“Out of my, Methodist!” Elroy shouted as he shoved a man aside. “All I need to see is one more Catholic in here and their stupid traditions and I am going to get sick! Stop making the sign of the cross! You people look like gangsters!”

People moved out of Elroy’s way but no one said anything to him. Not one greeting was offered, not one smile expended.

“All we need is the Bible and how a good old fashioned church service!” Elroy continued to shout as he made his way to the altar.

“And another thing, if you people think you are getting into heaven, we will see about that! Are you a Lutheran? Better not be!” Elroy growled a group who huddled on the other side of the aisle as he passed.

“Don’t you know what the Bible says about baptism! Let me tell you what you people need to do, it’s all in the good book! And what about the end times? Do you know the proper translation! You better get onboard with the proper way to do the Lord’s Supper,” he screamed to no one in

particular.

As Elroy passed a group of people who were culturally different from him, he spat on the floor, “Does Jesus know you are here?”

Elroy climbed the wide marble stairs in front of the altar; he prepared his sermon about how the church should be run. He finally reached the top and he turned to consider the growing crowds as they settled into their seats. Elroy was disgusted by all of the people and how they were showing very little reverence to the altar where he now stood. He could tell that these people never were in for a tough sermon because several church traditions were not being followed.

God placed his hand on Elroy’s shoulder and Elroy looked and saw God for the first time. God smiled at him with warmth, glory, and power.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Elroy whispered as he looked into the face of omnipotence and omnipresence. A vast plan flashed across Elroy’s little mind. A plan spanning across time and distance. God’s children were designed in many different shapes and sizes, speak different languages, have different gifts, and each one is hand crafted by God personally.

Elroy nodded and swallowed dryly, “I had better go sit down now.”

God nodded as people rushed up the stairs to carry Elroy down and to help him find a seat as his legs were still trembling so badly that Elroy could barely walk.

God is that infinite All of which man knows himself to be a finite part.
Leo Tolstoy, Diary

28 ENTER BOLDLY

Elle Baker from Andover, Kansas, marched up the massive steps leading into the Holy of Holies that stands at the center of heaven. At only six years old and a bit short for her age, the Cherubim lined up to watch the sight of little Elle walking past the tall gates that stood wide open. Her blond hair was neatly arranged in pig tails bounced beside her ears. Entering the throne room, Elle continued ahead as a tear ran down her cheek. A pout encompassed her face as her eyes stared at the shining floor in front of her. Angels were humbled to the point of spontaneous worship in the presence of God, yet Elle seemed not to notice the glory. The walls of the Holy of Holies stretched to the horizon and in the middle of the great hall sat the God's throne. Holiness emanated from God who sat comfortably on his throne watching His little Elle approach.

On the floor to the right of the throne sat Jesus on a wide maroon pillow waiting quietly. As soon as Elle could clearly see Jesus sitting on the floor, she broke into a run. Jesus opened his arms as Elle dove headfirst into his embrace. He held her for an eternity as she cried. Slowly he pulled her close until she was cradled in his arms. Jesus rocked her slowly as Elle began to calm down.

"I'm upset."

Jesus smiled and nodded.

"Alice is so mean!" Elle blurted out watching Jesus' face. The love Jesus had for his daughter poured back onto Mary encouraging her to continue.

"And I hit her. We had a fight and then my father grounded me. And I have to sit in my room every day after school for a week," Elle said quietly.

Jesus nodded waiting for the healing to begin.

"And I am sorry," Elle said as she began to cry again, "I didn't mean to hit her. I don't why I did that, I like her and I'm upset. And she wasn't being nice. And I have to say sorry, but I am kinda scared to do that."

Jesus rocked her as Elle continued. He listened until Elle stopped and they both sat there quietly.

“Why are you so sad?” Jesus asked.

“Daddy and Mommy are fighting again,” she whispered, “please help.”

God stood up from his throne while his physical size quickly diminished until He was the height of a normal man. God approached Jesus and Elle and sat down on the pillow beside them.

“Father, Elle is sorry for what she did to Alice. She needs strength to apologize for her actions and strength to seek forgiveness. And her parents are fighting which is scaring her. Please help her.”

God patted Elle on the head and took her from Jesus. God’s warmth surrounded Elle as His love mended the fractures in her soul. God held her as Jesus told Him the background of today’s events. God waved for the Holy Spirit who stepped out of the air and stood nearby with a warm smile. Her flowing dress sparkled like diamonds as she drifted in and out of view. The Holy Spirit gently took up space between God and Jesus and surrounded Elle.

“I will be with you, Elle. When you speak with Alice and apologize, I will help you,” the Holy Spirit said.

“And my parents?”

“I am already answering their prayers. I have been working with them for a while now. I heard your prayer; I will never leave you.”

God handed Elle to the Holy Spirit who helped Elle to her feet. She knelt kissing Elle on the forehead and then standing she held Elle’s hand.

“Let me take you back home,” the Holy Spirit said.

“Amen,” Elle replied as she opened her eyes. Elle was still kneeling in prayer in her bedroom closet with the door shut. The angry voices from downstairs had stopped. Elle felt at peace although she would not have been able to explain why. She yawned and went back to her bed pulling her covers around her tightly.

Two tall angels stood on either side of the bed watching over Elle while the Holy Spirit continued her work with Elle’s parents in the other room.

In Ephesians Chapter 3, Paul tells us,

“This was his eternal plan, which he carried out through Christ Jesus our Lord. Because of Christ and our faith in him, we can now come boldly and confidently into God’s presence. So please don’t lose heart because of my trials here. I am suffering for you, so you should feel honored.” (verses 11-13)

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As we pray, do we realize that this was part of God's plan? His plan was for the God-Man to pay the price so that the relationship between God and humanity could be restored. We now have the right as children of God to boldly enter into the God's presence without fear.

May we come to know how much God loves His children. Teach us to see how precious our prayers are to the Holy Father.

29 WORTHY TO SUFFER

The others accepted his advice. They called in the apostles and had them flogged. Then they ordered them never again to speak in the name of Jesus, and they let them go.

The apostles left the high council rejoicing that God had counted them worthy to suffer disgrace for the name of Jesus. And every day, in the Temple and from house to house, they continued to teach and preach this message: “Jesus is the Messiah.” Acts 5.40-42

They were flogged?

And they left “rejoicing that God had counted them worthy to suffer disgrace for the name of Jesus”

Huh?

God, please help us to cling to that attitude.

We are worthy to suffer for Jesus. It is an honor to be ridiculed, shunned, embarrassed, and even flogged for our faith. God considers us worthy of His name and His Son when we are persecuted for being Christian.

“But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is

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commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his steps. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.” 1 Peter 2.20-21.

How we handle ourselves under duress is how we show God our love. The point is that when we expect life to be a paradise now, we allow ourselves to be lulled into a false sense of reality. Paradise will come when Jesus returns to claim the earth or when we transition to heaven. Whichever happens first. Until then, we are more than able to handle a little social pressure for being an open Christian.

At least, we will not be flogged.

30 THE HOLY SPIRIT IN CHLOE

Chloe was a bubbly personality lady. She smiled all the time and talked to everyone within earshot. Unknown to most of her friends was her intense desire to stay as close to the Holy Spirit as possible. To everyone in Heaven, this was obvious. Chloe's earthly friends simply did not listen or pay attention very well to anyone around them.

The Ladies Bible Study had been meeting every Saturday morning at The Bounty, a pretty breakfast restaurant that was decorated with paintings and artwork made by local artists. Chloe was usually on time but this morning, she was running twenty minutes late.

"Hi, ladies!" Chloe said with a grin as she sat down. The usual greetings, handshakes, and hugs were exchanged.

"Funny thing happened on the way here."

Funny things were always happening to Chloe and the group grew quiet. "I went to pick up a birthday card for Mary, oh, happy birthday Mary, I forgot to pick up your card by the way, and I ran into Adriana. Can you believe it? And I invited her to join us. She seemed a bit down and I thought getting together to study the Word might be a good idea.

Angie frowned, "Chloe, we are supposed to be going through Hebrews Chapter Two. Adriana can join us after we finish this study in a few months."

"A few months? Who read Hebrews Chapter Two?"

All hands went up. "Thought so. If Adriana shows up, she can join in or eat breakfast. We should be good to go!"

Chloe pulled out her cell phone and dialed.

"Who are you calling?"

"Brian, I think I should."

As Chloe chatted with Brian, the ladies began their conversations and Adriana showed up. Chloe put her phone down and introduced Adriana

who quietly said hello. As she sat down, Angie said, “Adriana, I think we met once. Don’t you work at the hospital?”

Adriana looked down at her plate and said, “I did. I was laid off six months ago. And my finance and I have split up. It has been a bit rough.”

“I am so sorry to hear that. Who was your finance?” Chloe asked.

“Brian Larkins.”

“Isn’t that who just called, Chloe?” Angie asked unbelieving where this was headed.

“Hi, Adriana,” Brian said standing behind Chloe staring at Adriana, “I happened to be grocery shopping next door when Marcy called me. She told me that she had just run into you.”

”Hi,” Adriana said as she looked up at Brian.

“I tried calling you.”

“I don’t have a cell phone anymore.”

“Well, sit down,” Chloe said.

Brian took a seat next to Adrian and gave her a hug.

“May I take your order?” The waiter asked who had a William name tag on his shirt.

“Yes, William,” Chloe said as she looked at the young man. She felt the question rise in her so said, ”We are a women’s Bible study. Except for Brian here, he is just visiting. Do you know that God loves you?”

Tears welled up in waiter’s eyes as he struggled to control his emotions, “God wouldn’t love someone like me,” he said as a matter of fact as everyone at the table shifted uncomfortably.

“Oh sure, He does. That’s why He told me to say that,” Chloe said with a warm smile.

Angie sighed and rolled her eyes. “Here she goes again”, Angie muttered loud enough to be heard.

“Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil— and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.” That means we have been set free. Chapter Two in the Book of Hebrews. That is the book we are studying.”

“He became like us? God became human for us?” William asked incredulously.

“He did,” Brian said as he handed William a business card. “God, loves us that much. When you want, we can meet for a cup of coffee and talk about it.”

“Where did you get a business card?” Adriana asked.

“I finally got a job, honey. And I became a Christian,” Brian said and

then turning his attention back to William, he said, “So how about it? Would you like to get together sometime and have the Jesus talk?”

“Yeah. I think so.”

“Ok, great! I am going to have the number one!” Chloe said as everyone laughed, “I am starving!”

After breakfast, Chloe walked back to her car with the Holy Spirit.

“So how did I do?”

“Obedient. Thank you.”

“Oh, good! You know, I am very tired for some reason. My feet hurt in these shoes. I think I want to go home and just sleep for the rest of the day.”

“I understand, my darling. I have just one last thing for you to do today. I would like for you to send a greeting card to Elizabeth. One of those funny ‘How are you doing’ cards. And then you can sleep the rest of the day,” The Holy Spirit said as he gave Chloe a hug giving her more strength.

“Ok, sure. Now where I did I park my car?”

I know God will not give me anything I can't handle. I just wish that He didn't trust me so much. – Mother Teresa

31 IMAGINARY FRIEND

Laura and Jesus went for a walk to the park that was just at the end of her neighborhood. They had made a date to spend time together early that Saturday before the day awoke. Jesus had arrived early and he hung out in the kitchen with Laura as she made herself a cup of coffee. She shared her week with Him as he listened and made a few insightful comments. Laura was always surprised by what Jesus had to say about her life. He always saw things in a new way that Laura never naturally thought about.

The dawn heralded the new day with an array of color. Jesus and Julia walked hand in hand as they talked about the week. Julia had been studying the Book of Philippians and she had questions. As Jesus answered them, they laughed with one another.

The park was empty of people at this hour and the friends sat down on the large stone at the edge of the softball field. Jesus kissed Laura on the forehead. He told her again that He loved her very much.

"I love you too, Father," Laura said happily.

"Hey, Laura!"

Laura stop praying, sat up and quickly put her Bible back into her book bag. Ten girls with softball equipment walked up the path.

"What are you doing? Out for walk?"

"Yeah, just out for a walk. Not really doing anything."

Jesus sighed as he looked into the distance listening to his friend lie.

"Want to play?"

"Sure," Laura said as she set down her book bag and went to go play leaving her best friend for life behind.

Is your relationship with God real or imaginary? Your choice.

32 YOUR TRIAL

It is too hot for this nonsense, Andy thought as he stepped lightly up the marble stairs of the courthouse. His dark navy suit glistened like dew on a meadow. Andy wiped his brow with a bright purple handkerchief that matched his tie. He checked his gold watch that had diamonds embedded under each number. He was on time. Andy relished the feeling of control.

A clear blue sky covered the world as the sun brighter than Andy thought was possible poured down heat. Immaculate white steps towered before him as he jogged upward. As he neared the top of the stairs, Andy noticed a janitor sweeping the last step. Each movement of the broom wiped the floor clean and left a soft sound that was oddly comforting. He moved his broom in slow methodical sweeps as the shadow from the massive courthouse loomed over him. The janitor was wearing a simple blue apron over a brown uniform. Sweat stains marked his chest and stains ran down his pant legs.

"I am glad that I am not the janitor," Andy muttered as he headed for the tall black doors. He pulled gently on the door. He pulled the door handle again and it did not move. Andy looked at the door handle noticing that the sweeping sound had stopped.

Andy turned to see the janitor leaning on his broom watching him, considering him, judging him. Andy felt uncomfortable so he smiled his award winning gaze that worked on most judges but the janitor's gaze held Andy in place.

"You do not want to go inside. Not yet," the janitor said as he began sweeping again.

Andy smiled again as he thought that this man knows absolutely nothing about the law.

"Your law degree, reputation as an attorney, wealth, personality, social

influence, or experience with the judicial system will not be of any help to you today,” the janitor said with his back to Andy. Andy was stunned so he simply stood there watching the man sweep.

Andy then noticed that the janitor did not have a dustpan. Nor did he ever stop to pickup anything off the ground. As the janitor swept the grime, dust and scuff marks, they disappeared leaving behind a polished marble floor.

“How are you doing that?”

“I make all things new,” the janitor replied.

“What about my trial?” Andy said looking at his watch. He was now late.

The janitor stopped and turned to face Andy again. Again his gaze held Andy in place.

“Why are you here?”

“I don’t really know actually,” Andy said aloud realizing that he did not remember how he got to the courthouse.

The janitor waited patiently for an answer.

“How should I know? It must be a misunderstanding of some kind. I have never broken the law or done anything even remotely suspicious. I pay my taxes, I vote, I drive the speed limit, and I am a voting member on my church’s finance board. I lead a good life,” Andy said seeing that none of this was having an impression on this janitor.

So Andy continued making his case. Example after example was given but nothing had any effect. Andy persisted for just over an hour offering one defense after another and the janitor patiently listened until Andy had to sit down overtaken by a feeling of exhaustion and dread.

“What is happening?” Andy finally asked.

“You are on trial.”

Andy shook his head in disgust. He was probably getting the flu, he felt sick. His legs began to shake as he broke into a cool sweat. In fact, he felt terrified and the realization only made him sweat more.

Sitting beside him, the janitor put his arm around Andy and gave him a quick one armed hug before leaning back staring off at the horizon.

“Who are you?”

The janitor smiled sadly and said, “That is why you are on trial, Andy. Who do you say that I am?”

Andy was perturbed for a moment but the terror inside him was growing so fast that he thought he might curl up into a ball and start crying. Yet, Andy felt comforted by this odd man was sitting next to him. The last time he felt this kind of comfort was that strange night a year ago when he accepted Jesus as his savior. A one-time event, Andy had reasoned, a

moment of emotional weakness but that memory remained as real as a block of granite ever since and refused to leave him. Andy found himself thinking about that moment he had asked Jesus to take over his life every day since and now here he was on the steps of a giant courthouse sitting with some man that he somehow knew.

"You're Jesus," Andy said aloud staring at the Almighty who simply nodded, "and I must be dead."

Jesus nodded again as Andy slowly turned and stared at the black doors that would not open.

"You do not want to go inside. Not yet."

"Who is in there?" Andy whispered feeling the terror start to grow inside of him.

"My Father."

His life flashed before him like an oil soaked rag. He faced every lie, every theft, and every thought. Andy did not know how long he had begged and cried. Nor did he even know when he had started crying. Andy finally caught his breath in between sobs as he realized that Jesus was holding him listening to Andy's endless babble and excuses. Jesus seemed to be waiting for something.

"I deserve to die," Andy said aloud as he connected his terror to his fate.

"I am so sorry, Jesus. I just didn't know what a wretch I had been. Can you do anything to save me? Would you put in a good word with your Father? Please help me," his voice croaked. It was a lame request that Andy had heard countless times before and after court from clients who had too much money but broke too many laws to be saved. Andy had a lot of money but none of that seemed to matter up here.

Only what Jesus thought mattered.

"I know you, Andy. Don't be afraid; I will speak on your behalf today."

Jesus helped Andy to his feet, "Do I have to go inside?"

"Yes, everyone does. Don't be afraid; I know you and so will my Father."

The doors opened and Jesus led Andy past the gates of heaven.

33 POLITICAL CORRECTNESS

Adam had grown accustomed to the constant beeps and whirling sounds of the hospital machines around him. His was tucked neatly into bed with white cotton sheets that the nurse had recently changed. They had placed some warm blankets over him as his body could no longer keep itself warm. He missed the smell of pine. The sight of the mountains was now only a memory for he knew that the cancer would never let him out this bed and go for a walk along a wooded trail.

He once had months to live months ago. Now, he only had hours. Adam felt bad all the time now and in between his morphine naps, he recognized that his parents had flown in, a bad sign that this was indeed the end. He thought he remembered seeing his sister. A few of his brothers' children had tried to talk to him earlier but he couldn't keep up with their conversation. The pain now was never ending.

The doctor walked in looking at a chart.

"How are you feeling?"

Adam just stared at the doctor. He seemed nice enough but the questions he asked were generally useless. From the time Adam had met this doctor; he had a feeling that this man had the answer. A treatment that could cure him but the answer was never given.

"Ok. Can I bring you anything?"

Adam shook his head and died.

"Well, that's too bad," the doctor said as Adam's family started crying, "Too bad he didn't accept the cure. If he had, he would be alive today."

Mayhem broke out. Adam's parents attacked the doctor while Adam's sister pulled his hair. On the ground, the doctor was kicked repeatedly while the family hurled insults at him. Many screamed, why didn't you tell Adam about the cancer treatment?

As the doctor lay on the floor bleeding as the beating continued, the

doctor sputtered, “It wasn’t politically correct.”

When did political correctness mean that we can no longer be Christians? Yes. I said that.

When did it become ok to stop being a Christian?

How hard would it be to tell someone you know about Jesus? Or that you had a good time at church last weekend? And would they like to come?

Or that you even went to church?

Do you even introduce yourself as a Christian? What is the big deal? It’s not like we are out robbing banks and shooting random people. We certainly do not live in China where you will get beaten for being a Christian! (I pray for you by the way.)

I have heard of all kinds of excuses: I don’t have that gift, It’s not my calling, I am not ready, I am not comfortable, I doubt anyone would listen, It sounds strange, It isn’t appropriate to talk about religion.

What?

You are not being asked to hit the road in a bus painted red with a huge ‘I love Jesus’ slogan painted in yellow on the side. Nor are you being asked to weigh in on great theological debates.

When do we simply be a Christian? When do we be who we are?

Maybe we forgot what a Christian is. A Christian is a person who believes that Jesus is the Son of God who died for our sins so that we might have eternal life. His death restored the relationship with God and when we pray, He hears us. We have joy the world needs and does not understand. We love when most do not. We have faith that makes others curious. The Holy Spirit lives with us and we live within God. We are never alone.

All of my friends know that I am Christian and it isn’t a big deal. It isn’t a big deal because I don’t make it a big deal.

When I meet people for the first time, they often ask, “So what do you

do?”

“I am Christian and I work in the technology field.”

People know I go to church, they also know I go to the grocery store and that I like ice cream. It is who I am. Some see me from time to time reading the Bible, they see how I live and sometimes they have questions. And the Holy Spirit has created opportunities where I have the privilege of telling people about Christ - but not often.

I try to love everyone because God told me that this is his greatest commandment. I study the Bible because I want to get know God better so that I can live the life He wants me to live. I love God and I look forward to going fishing with Jesus someday.

I am not thinking about what anyone else thinks. I am only thinking about what God thinks. And I do not care what anyone else thinks about that. Neither should you.

May we come to see how wonderful it is to be Christian and may we be strong enough to let go of the world and grasp a hold of God as firmly as he is holding onto to us.

If we ever forget that we are one nation under God, then we will be a nation gone under. - Ronald Reagan

“The end of all things is near. Therefore be alert and of sober mind so that you may pray. Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen.” 1 Peter 4

34 LIFE

The Holy Spirit and his angel opened the bed room door. They listened to Carlos's steady breathing for a moment.

"We must help Carlos today. He is going to have a difficult morning."

The Holy Spirit gave two commands and the angels bowed before him before departing on their assignments. He watched Carlos sleeping for a moment. He felt great sadness for the next few hours would test Carlos dearly. The car crash had just killed everyone except his mother. It was time to wake up.

Carlos opened his eyes as he reached for his alarm clock. It was six am. Something was horribly wrong. Carlos lay in his bed holding his alarm clock as he prayed. Jesus sat on the bed next to him and listened.

The phone rang. Caller ID told him that it was Memorial Hospital, he decided not to answer thinking it was a sales call or a wrong number. And then the phone rang again, Angela, his cousin was calling. Carlos was certain that this was bad; he answered.

Five minutes later, Carlos was in his car racing toward the hospital where his mother lay dying. His father, uncle, aunt, and niece were already dead. And Angela had said that his mother was not expected to hold on much longer. He cried and prayed the entire drive with the Holy Spirit sitting next to him as angels cleared traffic. It was supposed to rain that morning, a slight shower but the clouds dared not rain that morning. They could tell the Holy Spirit did not want them to release their water until after Carlos was safely inside the hospital. The mist would have made the roads slick causing Carlos to crash.

Inside the hospital, Carlos spent five minutes with his mother holding her hand as doctors and nurses waited for the inevitable. In the end, Carlos told his mother that he loved her one last time. After her death, Carlos left the room and sat alone in the lobby considering his life. The Holy Spirit sat

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with him as the angels posted guard at all entrances keeping away all undesirable spirits.

Carlos sat and let his thought run.

Why did my prayers not work? What was the point? I didn't sign up for this. Doesn't God care? Where is He now?

The Holy Spirit sat patiently next to Carlos with his arm around him as Carlos ran through the litany of questions.

With a final sigh, Carlos stopped his questions and cried. The Holy Spirit held him.

35 SIDES

When Joshua was near the town of Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing in front of him with sword in hand. Joshua went up to him and demanded, “Are you friend or foe?”

“Neither one,” he replied. “I am the commander of the Lord’s army.”

At this, Joshua fell with his face to the ground in reverence. “I am at your command,” Joshua said. “What do you want your servant to do?”

The commander of the Lord’s army replied, “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy.” And Joshua did as he was told. Joshua 5.13-15

What would you do if came across an angel standing in the middle of the road holding a sword? I love Joshua’s response. He drops to his knees and asks what should I do? No pretense, no question, no boundaries. Joshua is on God’s side.

Whose side are you on?

Before we honestly answer, we should reflect and ask ourselves, do our requests themselves betray our true allegiance? Do we ask for things, gifts, blessings, or do we ask for guidance?

In the Lord’s Prayer, we say, “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven’.

How far would you go to see that His will is done on earth?

The Parable of the Fish

During the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln was asked if God was on his side and he is quoted as saying, “Sir, my concern is not whether God is on our side,” said the President, “my greatest concern is to be on God’s side, for God is always right.”

I believe his answer stands for all of us. Thank you, Mr. President.

As Christians, we should never ask if God is on our side. Our side is fleeting at best; prone to changes due to our natural imperfection. This might run against the grain for some us raised on the ideal of rugged individualism which is a heralded American virtue. Except when we look at the Bible, we are allowed a glimpse of who we really are in the grand plan.

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” John 10.11

“See what love the Father has given us that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.” 1 John 3.1

We are sheep and children. Not the type of character that is going to develop a plan much less decide upon a side.

May we come to see that we are on God’s side. We are His children and that our greatest desire should be to have His desires fulfilled.

36 I DO NOT KNOW

A farmer had two sons. They went to work in their fields one early morning when the emperor's soldiers marched up.

"Your oldest son must join his majesty's army!" The soldiers said.

"How will I harvest my crops without him? I am old and my youngest son is still too small!"

Without an answer, the soldiers enlisted the oldest son and marched away. The two worked until night fall without rest and only pulled in half of the field.

"What will we do, father?" the youngest son asked.

"I do not know," the father said as he looked at the remaining crops in his field. He doubted that he had the strength to finish the job and his youngest had fainted several times that day and he dared not push him anymore.

The next morning, a wandering tribe knocked on the farmer's door and said, "We are hungry nomads and have little to offer. May we have some of your crops?"

The farmer looked at the starving people and pointed to the field standing with half of his harvest, "You may take what you can for my son and I are not strong enough to harvest the rest."

The farmer, his wife, and his youngest son watched the tribe clear the entire field. The farmer's son played all day with the children of the wandering tribe. He broke his leg falling out of a tree and the tribe correctly bound his leg but the son would not be able to walk for many months until his leg healed. Once the work was complete, the tribe thanked the farmer and dropped off a few bushels but the bulk of the harvest they kept for themselves as they were many.

"What will we do?" The farmer's wife asked wondering how they will survive on half a harvest.

The Parable of the Fish

"I do not know," the farmer said.

The next day the soldiers returned. "We need to take your youngest son to run messages to the frontlines for our general."

"He has broken his leg and will be unable to walk for many months." And the soldiers left.

"What will we do?" the farmer thought and he said aloud, "I do not know."

The next week a terrible flood washed across the river plateau where the war was raging. The flood waters damaged buildings and ruined many of the King's crops.

The soldiers approached the farmer and his wife. "What will we do?" the farmer's wife asked as the soldier's approached.

"I do not know. God knows."

"We have come to buy your harvest, father!" The farmer's oldest son declared, "The King will pay four times its value as his crops were destroyed in the flood. In addition, he would like to purchase the land and employ you to be caretakers of the land on his behalf for he has heard that you are generous and honest in your dealings."

"Praise God," The farmer said.

How much do you trust God? Do you really believe He loves you? It is easy to question His love when everything else is falling down around you. And it is easy to question His love when everything is going right and the only thing you need to worry about is whether to order that delivery pizza with extra cheese.

Sometime the best response in a crisis is to say, 'I don't know. God knows'.

"If God shuts one door, he opens another." - Irish Proverb

God loves each of us as if there were only one of us. – St. Augustine

37 SANDWICH

Tony sat with his friend Mario on the front step watching him eat a sandwich. A question burned inside of him that he knew he had to ask.

“When was the last time you ate?” Tony asked thinking that this was a strange thought for a sixth grader on a Saturday morning. They were about to go play baseball in the neighbors field next to the convenient store when Mario asked for a sandwich.

“I had some potato chips last night. My dad died and my mom lost her job so we get by,” Mario said.

“Wait a second,” Tony got up and went inside and grabbed a paper bag left over from the family’s last visit to the grocery store. He placed a loaf of bread, a fresh jar of peanut butter, and a fresh jar of jelly that they had in the pantry. Four cans of soda and a candy bar were added. Mario had two little sisters at home.

“Here, take these home to little Sally and Glenna.”

Mario took the food and only nodded before running off to his home.

Tony sighed and went to his room where he emptied his savings that he kept hidden in his sock drawer. Three dollars and seventy five cents. His parents were still at work so he headed to the convenient store to talk to the store manager, Izzy.

The store manager’s name wasn’t Izzy but Tony couldn’t pronounce his real name, so Izzy stuck. “Hey, Izzy!”, Tony said as he walked into the store.

Izzy stood behind the counter next to the cigarettes and lottery tickets. Izzy’s brother and cousin were deep in a conversation speaking a language Tony could not even mimic.

“Yes, Tony. How may I help you today? Want to buy some Yogo bars, you might like them and they are on sale.”

“No, I want to buy a sandwich. How much? I have three dollars and

some change.” He understood about tax but he didn’t know how to figure it out.

“A sandwich? Three fifty even for you. There are foot long hoagies and that is good deal.”

“Not for me, Izzy, for a friend.” And Tony proceeded to tell Izzy about what Mario had said. Izzy listened intently as did his brother and cousin. Izzy said something in his language that Tony did not understand and the two men walked into the back storage room.

“Ok, Tony. Three fifty. And you go with my family to Mario’s home. We have some stuff in the back for them. And then you come back here and tell me what happened. Ok?”

“Sure,” Tony said and he handed his money to Izzy.

In the back of the store stood Izzy’s truck which was the most rusted vehicle Tony had ever seen. The men put four boxes stuffed with chips, beef jerky, doughnuts, cans of soda, and candy. And they all hopped in the truck and headed to the grocery store.

At the grocery store, the three walked up and down every aisle and just bought stuff. Toilet paper, household cleaners, laundry detergent, soap, shampoo, cans of vegetables, juice boxes, milk, eggs, cereal, and anything else that a family of four could use.

“Think this is good?” Izzy’s brother asked. His accent was heavy and Tony never really spoke to him before.

“Yeah. I think so.” Tony said looking at the stuffed grocery cart.

“Good. I have known hunger. No good.” With that they checked out with ten bags of groceries and loaded them in the back of the truck and headed to Mario’s.

When they pulled up, Father Stephen and Pastor Eve were also pulling into the driveway.

“Good morning, Tony! Izzy called us,” Pastor Eve said with a smile. She was a co pastor of the church Tony’s family attended most Sundays. Father Stephen belonged to another church on the far side of town.

Anna stood in the door way as everyone walked up carrying groceries. She started to cry.

“What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.” James 2.14-17

You will notice that James does not talk about results. There is no expectation that anything we do on our own is the end game. We are simply to love one another and give our neighbor a sandwich.

I can give someone a sandwich in love. I can make a phone call. In the spirit of love, I can ask how someone is doing.

How much easier is life when we expect that God will handle to rest? I do not have to figure it all out and most of the time, I can honestly say, I do not know how this is going to turn out.

Yet, we continue. We give, we love, we listen, we ask.

It's the small things in life that demonstrate great faith.

38 EVERY MORNING

Electric guitars start playing loudly as Stephen rolls over looking for his alarm clock. With a slap on the head, the boxy clock goes silent. He sits up in bed and prays a short prayer thanking God for another day and asking for help so he can be the man God intends. Two angels bow in the presence of the Holy Spirit as the Holy Spirit sits next to Stephen pouring strength into him and telling him that he must be patient today.

Stephen yawns and stretches before he notices that Eve, his wife, is already up and down stairs. He can smell the coffee. The Holy Spirit encompasses the house as Eve prays for a friend.

Another alarm begins to chirp and two more angels step into the hallway waiting for Chloe to awaken. Chloe staggers out of her room wondering how the middle school track meet will go this afternoon. She is nervous. As she brushes her teeth, she prays to God asking Him to be with her during the meet. The Holy Spirit gives her a hug before and Chloe feels less anxious.

Elle is still sleeping in the next room so the Holy Spirit wakes her up prompting her to check her homework folder. She realizes that the homework is still downstairs on the dining room table so she dashes out of her room and puts it in her backpack. And then Elle remembers to pray so she says hello to God and the Holy Spirit waves back with a smile. Elle smiles as she races back upstairs to get ready.

Brianna, the youngest, is singing to herself in front of her mirror. Today is choir and Brianna is struggling with the lyrics. She sighs and wonders if she will ever get it right. The Holy Spirit whispers the lyrics that she forgot into her ear and encourages her to try again.

Downstairs, the family gathers around the kitchen table eating and chatting while Eve lets the dogs outside. The two dogs immediately pick a scent and run to investigate. Earlier that night a rabid skunk was pondering

whether or not to make a den beneath the deck by the back door until an angel shooed it away. The same angel tells the dogs to stay away from the scent and the dogs drop the matter and decide to go the bathroom instead.

Another angel stands on top of the house looking south at the billowing clouds. At God's order, the angel pushes the storm front east where baseball sized hail fall harmlessly into a wooded area.

Everyone lines up at the front door and holds hands. It is Elle's turn to pray so she asked for God to bless everyone. The Holy Spirit inside each person surrounds the prayer circle. As the school bus pulls up, the girls gave their parents a quick kiss before running down the driveway followed by their angels.

Stephen grabs his briefcase and he and Eve walk out of the front door. Two angels wait for them at the end of the driveway ready to follow them to work. The Holy Spirit oversees every member of the family while maintaining order in the universe, creating every flower, guiding the photosynthesis process of every plant on earth, and counting every tear of His children worldwide.

People see God every day, they just don't recognize him. – Pearl Bailey

39 PARABLE OF THE FISH

One quiet morning a priest sat praying in his cell behind the tall walls of the old monastery. He pleaded with God to show himself. He sat in his cell everyday in solitude and felt disconnected. Realizing he did not fully understand God's presence in his life, he decided to speak to a fish about it. Without a word, he walked through the courtyard, past the barns and livestock pens where his friends were diligently working, and down the path that lead to Crystal Water Lake. He followed the path so lost in his struggle to understand God; he did not notice the cool air against his skin and the warmth of the rising sun. A bright sun stood high in the sky watching the clouds slowly migrate south. Soon the priest found himself at the water's edge.

Removing his linen shoes, the priest strolled upon the white sandy beach. A bright sun stood high in the sky watching the clouds slowly migrate south. His long robes gently swept the sand smooth as he passed along the beach pondering the sight of the clear waters and the dancing reflection of the heavenly sunlight.

An old rowboat rested on the shore line rocked gently by the small waves. So without much thought; the priest pushed rowboat into the cool water. He stepped in, sat down and began to row. After a while, the priest found himself far from shore and he stopped rowing letting the boat drift. He patiently waited for a fish to come along. He did not wait long. A sparkling fish lazily swam up to the boat curious of the odd shape that was making so much noise on top of his quiet world. When the fish was close enough, the priest reached down and gently picked up the fish.

The priest asked the fish, "What is the water like?"

"It is life! It is all around. Within and without. Both up and down. Water simply is," the fish replied, "It is like having God in your life!"

The priest nodded considering the response. With a smile, he set the fish back in the water.

He looked across the water and felt the gently breeze caress his face. Looking up toward the heavens, he finally saw the clouds above heavy with rain were being carried along by the wind. He took a deep breath and felt the crisp air rush in and revitalize his body.

The priest satisfied that he now understood God was his life took up the oars and paddled back to shore.



“The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.

Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge.

There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard.

Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.”

Psalm 19.1-4 (NIV)

In this beautiful song, the lyrics tell us that God is everywhere. He is so very amazing that even the sky has something to say about it. In other words, if you are on earth and want to experience God, look around. And in your looking, may you see that He is near.

He is all around you, like water to a fish.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stephen lives in Kansas with his wife and three daughters. He is an active Christian and author.

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