

HOLLIS MCGEHEE

A RIVER TO
CROSS



(A Story of Life)

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

THIS IS A BOOK ABOUT life and as such is presented in parts that to some extent reflect different phases and stages in life and results in some gaps. In order to facilitate transitions between those phases and stages, in order to emphasize certain important spiritual truths and to generally help the reader travel through this work, I have inserted some travel aids that I call "waypoints." The first waypoint is by far the most important, and if you miss everything else in this book, don't miss Waypoint #1, which points the way to the only hope we have in this world.

WAYPOINT #1:

SALVATION

THE JOURNEY IN LIFE AS a Christian does not begin until and unless we are born again, born not of the flesh but of the Spirit.

¹Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ²This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.” ³Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” ⁴Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” ⁵Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ ⁸The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” (John 3:1-8)

We have all been born once in the flesh, but to be reconciled to God, we must each be born again. How does that happen? Jesus said, in John 3 above, that we must be born again—a second birth that is spiritual—and this is the way the second birth occurs:

¹⁶For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

God loves us and made a way for us to be saved by believing in Jesus and His finished work. Jesus’ final words on the cross were “It is finished.”

²⁸After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the Scripture), “I thirst.” ²⁹A jar full of sour wine stood there, so they

put a sponge full of the sour wine on a hyssop branch and held it to his mouth.³⁰ When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, “It is finished,” and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. (John 19:28-30)

Jesus was simply saying He had finished His work of accomplishing salvation—He had paid our sin debt in full. Jesus made a way for us to come to the Father through His own finished work accomplished on the cross. Jesus also said that He is the way, the truth, and the life and that no man can come to the Father except through Him.

¹ “Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. ² In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. ⁴ And you know the way to where I am going.” ⁵ Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” ⁶ Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷ If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.” (John 14:1-7)

God has made a way; the way is Jesus. Jesus has done all of the work for us to be saved, and salvation is a gift to us from God. How do we receive this gift of life, this new birth from God?

¹ And you were dead in the trespasses and sins ² in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— ³ among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. ⁴ But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— ⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷ so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰ For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (Ephesians 2:1-10)

When we are—by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone—born again, our life’s journey as a Christian begins. This

Salvation

wonderful gift is ours in this one way only: as a gift from God for which Jesus Christ paid in full and to which we can add nothing.

Before being born again, we may think of ourselves as trusting in God for various things (like a new job, a car, safe travels, protection for our family), and those are all great and demonstrate some level of trust/faith in God. But that is not saving faith. Saving faith, which is given to us by God as well, is when we completely quit trusting in anything we have done or could ever do and place our trust fully in the finished work of Jesus Christ. When we are born again, we repent of our sins, turn away from our old life, and seek from then on—led by the Holy Spirit, who now resides in us—to follow Jesus Christ as our example in all the rest of our lives. It does not mean you won't ever get off the path; you will. It does not mean you will "feel" a certain way or a different way; you might and you might not. What it does mean is that our lives will become different; people will see the changes in us over time. The process of salvation is both instantaneous but also a lifelong process as God's grace works in us day by day, night by night, challenge by challenge to transform us into the person God put us here to be—that is, to be Christlike. If you place your trust in Christ now, I encourage you to share that with someone. And if you are not affiliated with a Bible-teaching and -believing church, then find one and get involved; tell the pastor and as soon as possible seek to confirm your salvation to the world by water baptism.

PROLOGUE

"WELL, HOLLIS, ARE YOU PREACHING or drinking, drinking or preaching? What are you doing now? I never know which one, but I know you are doing one or the other." Those words pierced the depths of my soul to a place long untouched. This jolting proclamation was made in a crowded gathering of family and friends and at a time when I hoped to show that I was "well." I am keenly aware of my own failures and generally free to confess them. The timing and circumstances of this penetrating question cut deep—leaving me with a feeling of failure. Nevertheless, I managed to reply with at least what I hoped was an outward appearance of calm and peace, "Neither, I am just writing and judging." Inside I felt like my entire life had been completely invalidated.

Several months later, while walking near my home along Black Creek Trail in the De Soto National Forest, those same piercing words came crashing back into my mind: "Are you preaching or drinking?" Yes indeed, just what is the essence of my life, of what does my life consist now? Then I realized the words "Are you preaching or drinking?" diagnosed my entire life. Indeed, from the earliest memories to the present, I can see that the entirety of my sixty-four years have been comprised of periods when I was either "preaching" or "drinking." This book was originally undertaken to understand how and why I wound up sixty-plus years old, alone, and fighting a third slide back into the dark, bottomless pit of death called alcoholism.

The story that follows is my story, and it was originally written as part of a mental/emotional process of seeking to review and

Prologue

understand my life and how I might avoid a repeat of uncontrolled alcohol abuse and all of the attending circumstances that inevitably accompany such a failure. I have since come to realize there was a much deeper purpose for the writing of the first part of this story and the rewrite that appears here.

It has been said, likely by more than one, that no book should be written except that which may not be contained within; only write that which of its own weight and force comes forth from the soul. I can honestly say that what follows is just such a writing. If you read the whole of this effort, I think you will readily agree this account could have come only from a higher source than the one whose name the book bears. To be sure, there is a lot of me in here, and that part I ask you to work past to get to the meat of what God has here for each of us. A word of gentle caution: The struggles I document here are not unique to me; we all share in these struggles. The good things noted here are solely the work of the Creator. With that said, it must also be noted—and this I must simply state on faith (yet I know it better than I know things on which I could lay my hand)—all good is from God and it is all by His grace. Yet there is a part of our heart that must be ready and willing to yield itself to God’s moving and, at the same time, could not yield itself but that God enabled it to happen. All that is good is from God, but we each have our part—yet it is all absolutely from Him. This is a deep and immovable spiritual truth wrapped in an unsolvable conundrum.

Thinking back now on the earliest days of my life, before I was even three years old, I found the path that led to destruction, and it’s always been like that—traveling the dark road and then coming to the light. Over and over this process has repeated and stamped itself on my life. The low road involved living out self-centered behavior (“drinking”—acting out inappropriately as I looked for my place in the world. The remainder of my life was “preaching” in the sense of mostly walking with a daily goal of keeping my eyes lifted to God. All of the trails making up my life were taken as part of a search for my place, with a repeated failure to live in the moment and trust only God—that is the true key to being a person after God’s own heart.

Who am I, why am I here, and what is my place with God? I just want to be me. Most of the sober drunks that I know today will confess that a major factor in their alcohol abuse was trying to fit in or feel

comfortable in their own skin. What I could have accomplished if I had understood all this six decades earlier . . . but that is where the story starts,¹ and I would not be me if I had traveled some other path. Part One was written in real time when I felt like I was fighting and clawing to survive.

¹ I first wrote this account in 2012–2013. I am not going to make any substantive change to what I wrote then because it came up from my deepest consciousness at a vulnerable and challenging time in my life.

WAYPOINT #2:

HISTORY OF PART ONE

PART ONE WAS NOT ORIGINALLY written as a book. Its original purpose was self-reflection in an effort to understand challenges and failures I experienced and how not to repeat them. Now, as a book for the public, the goal is the same but additionally to encourage readers to take an honest and thorough look at their own lives, to understand God's call on each of us, and to avoid duplicating mistakes made by me.

While I feel sound about the accuracy and scriptural foundation of the spiritual matters presented here, it is my strongly held opinion and belief that each of us should check anything I or anyone says or writes against the whole counsel of Scripture, and anywhere it departs therefrom, it must be rejected!

PART ONE²

A RIVER TO CROSS

² This is the original writing from 2012–2013 with very few modifications and updates to address the subsequent years to date (2017).

INTRODUCTION

BARELY SOBER, SEPARATED FROM MY wife of over thirty-five years, alone, my life and family in shreds, and living where I had once done most of my drinking—I was living with a deathly fear of a slide back into the abyss of active alcoholism. I felt the earth moving under my feet, and the feeling was not good. The strong will, the one that worked both for me and against me, came welling up into a fierce determination to live, to survive, to make it through this transition sober and in one piece. I began to feel that victory over lifelong demons could be mine if I could just stay sober long enough to think it through and write it all down. I had been to this precipice before, and knowing life could turn either way, I was determined to live the life I was created to live.

I began by delving deep into my conscious memory, taking an honest and critical look into the events of my life from earliest childhood coming forward. I literally sat down and began to write down the first things my brain recorded in the deep mental recesses not since destroyed by alcohol. The results were compelling, poignant, hilariously funny, deeply sad, and interesting: there emerged a story of growing up in the rural South. The deeper picture, the one I was looking for, revealed patterns and pictures of an addictive life in the making. In Alcoholics Anonymous they call that “stinking thinking,” and my investigation of my own life reveals that behavior appearing in earliest childhood. The patterns of “preaching and drinking/drinking and preaching” were there from my very earliest recollections.

One side of my family has a long family history of addictive behavior. Yet history alone is not, in my opinion and experience, an unavoidable sentence compelling one to carry on the history of those

who went before. Though I had followed those addictive paths for much of my life, I could now avoid going back down those destructive paths. The key is being willing to take an unflinchingly honest look at myself—who I am, how I got here, and how I can get back “across the river” to the person God created me to be. Then I have to act on what I’ve learned—be willing to embrace the person I really am, not the illusion I have presented to myself for sixty-plus years.

A River to Cross is born from desperation—a desperate and last effort to avoid a third, final, and fatal fall into the mental abyss and very real grave where unabated addiction always leads. It’s an honest, telling, and sincere effort to help me stay sober, grow in sobriety, and become a productive, giving member in the world in which I live. The result is clear hope for me and for you—the some of you who are on the very path I describe, but also for you who are not where God called you to be (an honest evaluation puts us all in that place). This is a story of a spiritual journey with a sincere effort to tell it like it was and is; there is also a story here of growing up in the rural South of the 1950s and 1960s, of rural life with all of its idiosyncrasies, laughter, and amazement, and just good old-fashioned country fun. This is a story of how, like rivers, our lives ebb and flow through the floods and changes life brings our way; tragically, in my case, if there wasn’t a flood, I would somehow manage to find one of my own creation, not natural but very devastating.

PRELUDE

WHAT DOES IT MEAN WHEN a door that has always been open is suddenly closed?

Jails have played a prominent role in my life; I have been going in and out of prisons and jails since the late 1960s. I have gone from visiting prisoners in the county jail during my teenage years to working with “transitional living” inmates at Parchman during my law school days. As an attorney, I have been in many prisons and jails across the state of Mississippi to counsel with clients charged with crimes. As a child of God I have visited with inmates for spiritual purposes, from the county jails to maximum security and death row at the Mississippi State Penitentiary at Parchman. For fifty years I have passed in and out of these many jails and prisons freely, but on this night it’s different. I am shackled to a gray steel bench, and the massive jail door isn’t opening for me this time.

What do you do when your life is turned upside down? How did I get here? Why? When you find yourself on the wrong side of the river, how do you get back across? *A River to Cross* is a story of life, its challenges, its blessings, and its saving.

This is the story of my life, yet there is nothing unique about me or my life. Just as I am intertwined with the Homochitto River, so are we all intertwined at the deepest and most basic part of our being. It is my hope and prayer that reading this will encourage and help you to honestly look at your life and see how you got where you are and how to get across the river to where you want to be and, more pointedly, where God created you to be. We all have room and cause for reflection, and we all have a better place to go. My life has involved crossing

A River to Cross

many rivers—crossing and recrossing the same river many times (“preaching to drinking/drinking to preaching”). The good news for me is this: I finally know which side of the river is for me. I can now answer that pointed question with assurance, “It’s not drinking, and by God’s grace it never will be again. With the help of the Lord, I am on the right side of the river.” I never want to go back across.

We all have a river to cross; with the help of God, let’s cross this river together. The key to crossing the river is simply trusting God and stepping out into the river. When we do our part, God always does His.

CHAPTER I

LIFE IS LIKE A RIVER

(*THE HOMOCHITTO*)

“There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God . . .”

Psalm 46:4 (NIV)

THERE ARE TIMES WHEN RIVERS abandon their natural course and overflow the banks, resulting in damage to their own borders and all adjacent to them. Depending on the scope and length of the flood, the damage can be extensive.

In like fashion, we all have moments and seasons when we defy our natural course and overflow. When we abandon our intended course, our place, there are always consequences to us and to those around us. The closer we are to another person, the greater the damage they suffer when we overflow our banks.

Floods are a natural part of the cycle of rivers, yet we seek ways to effectively limit the damages from those floods. Likewise, our lives have times of flooding. My life has been sprinkled with many floods: floods that have often defined me, damaged me, and tragically damaged the lives of others. A rampaging river is a destructive river. A rampaging life is likewise destructive at every level. Rain and rain-producing storms will always come. How do I prepare for them and establish/maintain flood controls to keep the river strong, healthy, and in the banks as much as possible and to minimize damage when the floods do occur?

If life is like a river, one must ask, “Which river best reflects my life?” I don’t have to even pause to answer this question: the Homochitto is the river of my life. We enjoy many connections and bear similar high and low watermarks in our respective histories; we both have undergone many changes, and the marks left by the floodwaters are there for all to see. I have enjoyed a love affair with the Homochitto going back to my early childhood.

While at Ole Miss, I told many people I had discovered an amazing natural phenomenon: Franklin County is the geographic center of the universe. At the heart of the universe’s center point is a strong and handsome lady, the Homochitto River. God spoke in creation, and as He spoke, the Homochitto River came forth from the throne of God and flowed through and across the long and many generations of time and man.

The Homochitto’s headwaters are along the common boundary between Copiah County and Lincoln County, Mississippi. She flows ninety miles from her headwaters to her confluence with her big sister, the Mighty Mississippi! In those ninety miles, the Homochitto flows through and across Franklin County, from its northeast corner to its most southwest corner.

As the Homochitto traverses Franklin County, she clearly divides the pine forests, cornfields, and steep green hills of our county with her shallow, sparkling clear waters and wide white sand beaches. She sustains those same forests and fields with her clear nectar of life-sustaining waters.

The lady we call Homochitto has not always looked as she does today. For thousands of years before she was first touched by man, the Homochitto was a slower, deeper, and narrower river, with forest-crowded banks heavy with virgin cypress and longleaf pines. In 1938, the Army Corps of Engineers redirected this elegant lady out of the old Mississippi River channel now known as Lake Mary directly into the main channel of the Mississippi River a little north of their former point of confluence.

The result of this extensive and challenging engineering feat was to speed up this grand old dame. The increased speed of her flow began a destructive erosion of her own banks. In the last eighty years she has become broader and lost much of her depth. In place of her heavily forested banks she developed wide, beautiful white sand bars. Instead of the deep, slow girl of “her youth,” she is now wider

Life Is Like a River

and shallower yet quite sparkling and beautifully framed by her long strips of white sand beaches.

In the same way the Homochitto defines and divides Franklin County, she has likewise flowed over, through, and across the sixty-four years of my life, both defining and dividing. She is a real beauty. But as with all beauties, there are times when the beast side of the beauty shows up. Just as the Homochitto has undergone great changes, so it seems I have experienced dramatic changes as well, and many times the beast in my own life has reared its ugly head.

This story of rivers and life is the one I seek to share with you in these pages. My original purpose in writing was to find a way to cross the river, to get back on the right side of the river for me. The publishing of these thoughts, these pages, is in the hope of encouraging you to take a close and candid look at your own life. I pray you will find laughter, encouragement, strength, and humility here as I share with you some times of calm and some times of cataclysmic floods and the lessons I have learned and am continuing to learn through the process. I also hope that at some level these pages may help you avoid some of the dangerous currents and eddies of life that I, through my own foolishness, fell victim to. May God bless you and draw you to Him as you read this account of my search for meaning and direction in the river of life.

AN HONEST LOOK AT YOUR OWN LIFE IS
KEY TO NOT REPEATING YOUR MISTAKES.

CHAPTER 2

THE HEADWATERS OF MY RIVER OF LIFE

(MY EARLIEST MEMORIES BEGIN . . .)

“Seek and ye shall find . . .”

Matthew 7:7 (KJV)

MY EARLIEST MEMORIES BEGIN ON Railroad Avenue in Bude, Mississippi, in the white clapboard home belonging to my great-grandfather William Calvin McGehee. It's the home he built when he moved his family to town when Bude was born around 1912 or so. My first conscious memory, at about two years of age, is leaving our home alone in the early-morning hours and making my way up Railroad Avenue to a place of great wonder and excitement: the Bude Barbershop.

The Bude Barbershop was run by Mr. Shelley McDaniel and Mr. Pap Temple. I am told that prior to my solo trip to the barbershop, I had been taken there by my father for my first haircut. I have to assume that earlier visit must have awakened in me a curiosity and a willingness to push and test the boundaries of exploration for a two-year-old. This is my first conscience memory of “drinking” (living life my way).

Today, when my mind drifts back to the Bude Barbershop, I can close my eyes, take a deep breath, and conjure up the smell of talcum powder, cigar smoke, bay rum, shaving cream, farmers’ overalls after a night of chasing the fox hounds, and stale sweat. I can see the mirrors, the barber’s shades, the cigar stand, the leather strops, and the fox horns on the walls, as well as the barber’s chairs, the seats along

The Headwaters of My River of Life

the opposing wall, and the front door and windows looking out across the railroad yards to the sawmills with their piles upon piles of pine logs and stacks upon stacks of freshly sawn pine lumber.

I can hear the steady buzz of the clippers and men's talk as they discussed matters of politics, bass fishing, hand-grabbing catfish, fine fox-hunting hounds, hot dinners of crusty chicken pie and buttery cornbread, and the love of a good shave. I don't recall the details of any particular conversation, but I do remember my great wonder at the words of the men there. I can tell you the topic that grabbed and held my attention back then: the closed-off, mysterious back room of the shop. To this day I don't know for sure what was really going on, but I know that Mr. Shelley made it clear he didn't want me going there because " wildcats" and all manner of things waited to eat up little boys like me in that back room. He couldn't have known then, but far from scaring me, he was stoking the fires of my insatiable desire to see the " wildcats" and other varmints for myself.

The whole notion of having to see things for myself was a foreshadowing of, or maybe a part of the formation of, the deep channels in which my life was already beginning to flow. I already had that need, that desire to see things for myself and to go where someone else said, "Don't!" When I think back to my early-morning solo trip to the barbershop at such a young age and I plug that into today's thinking, well, you just can't imagine that today. It seems quite unimaginable for a two-year-old to leave home alone and go anywhere. To leave and go up the street to a local business where men gathered seems even more bizarre. Thankfully, in that day it was not a cause for concern. My mother came and retrieved me, as she did on subsequent occasions when I made other early-morning expeditions to the barbershop. Dorothy Simmons McGehee, my mother, a part of the Great Generation, was and is a great mother. In a way we certainly didn't see or think of at the time, my mother's "coming to the rescue" was another foreshadowing of things to come.

It would be fair to say that as early as two years of age, my river sometimes jumped the channel and ran outside the banks; as my cousin would put it sixty years later, I had quit preaching and gone to drinking. At a level deeper than I can really explain, this "leaving home" was a new direction for my life to flow. This new, independent direction is one, like the Corps tinkering with the Homochitto River, that would have significant and sometimes destructive consequences

throughout my life. People seem to prefer life to always be tame, to be predictable and controllable. I have never found life to be that way, nor do I believe it shall ever be. I think C. S. Lewis said it best: "However often we think we have broken the rebellious self we shall still find it alive."³

"I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world." (John 16:33)

THE BATTLE WITH THE PERSON IN THE
MIRROR IS A LIFELONG PROCESS—BUT IT IS
A BATTLE THAT MUST BE FOUGHT AND ONE
WORTH FIGHTING—YOU ARE WORTH IT!

³ C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: HarperCollins, 1960), 89.

CHAPTER 3

A RIVER OUTSIDE ITS BANKS

“I am the LORD your God, who brought you up out of Egypt. Open wide your mouth and I will fill it.”

Psalm 81:10 (NIV)

JUST BECAUSE SOMETHING WILL FIT in your mouth doesn't mean it belongs there. This is a lesson I seemed to have missed entirely, even from a very young age. I didn't know or apparently didn't want to hear that the lines were there to help you color, to help you through life; I thought they existed to prevent life from happening. It seems that even in the tender years I felt challenged by the lines and so just used them to frame the inside of my outside.

Strangely, I recall events from the earliest years of childhood, at least as early as age two. I was two the first time I had my stomach pumped at Franklin County Memorial Hospital. I thought the white stuff in the tube was ice cream, so I ate it! It wasn't ice cream. It was white glue, a rubber cement-type glue in a tube under the kitchen sink. My mother was washing dishes, and I was playing on the floor under the kitchen sink. Setting the example for most of the rest of my life, I saw something that looked good, and with little thought and no restraint, I went for it full speed ahead.

My memory of what happened next is vivid and stark. They put me in a “straitjacket,” rolled me up in a sheet, and trussed me up like a calf in a catch-pen squeeze chute. Once they had me all wrapped up, they came at me with the stomach pump. I can't describe to you

exactly what the pump looked like, but I can tell you it seems some part of it was black and some other part was red. Those memories are pretty well etched into my mind to a level deep enough that I can almost associate smells with this pointed recollection.

What I seem to recall with the greatest clarity is that for a brief time in that treatment/operating room, I was the center of attention. I have a sensory awareness of being thrilled by that attention. I didn't know it then, but that thrill, that rush was something called adrenaline, the misuse of which would haunt me for many decades to come. The desperate need or desire for a rush would create trouble and lead to tragedies that, mercifully, none of us anticipated. Regardless of how much the adrenaline rush appealed to me, I don't recall the process as being anywhere close to enjoyable, and my mother says (I don't recall this) that when I thought they should be through, I said emphatically, "All fru now, Hollis get down now."

Less than a year later I had my second encounter with a stomach pump at Franklin County Memorial Hospital. Round two happened when Mr. Hilton May was treating our house on Railroad Avenue in Bude for various pests—of the insect variety, not of the little boy variety. He had a bulb-type sprayer that was awfully attractive to me. While Mr. May and my mother were concluding the business of paying the bill, I was back behind them with the bulb in one hand and the business end of the sprayer in my mouth, apparently trying hard to get rid of the pests within.

Sensing an unhealthy quiet, my mother turned and spotted me with the sprayer. Just as she prepared to faint, she cried out to Mr. May, "Will it kill him?" Mr. May promptly responded, "Don't worry, Mrs. McGehee, that stuff wouldn't hurt a flea." Mother retorted, "Then what in the world am I paying you for?"

My career at Franklin County Memorial Hospital was really starting to bud by this time. My trips there were far from over, and tragically for me and my parents, I was becoming a well-recognized figure among the faithful at our tiny country hospital in the mid-1950s.

I don't have any sense that my actions were intentionally pointed toward self-destruction, but over and over then and later I had significant periods when I refused to color inside the lines (I was "drinking"). There were also times of "preaching," and the two ebbed and flowed. Writing this account makes me look back across my life with a critical eye, and I am confronted with a very clear pattern of being on

A River Outside Its Banks

the receiving end of one calamity after another, usually arising from circumstances I never should have been in to start with. The pattern, as I see it looking back, is one of unintentional thrill-seeking leading to adrenaline-rush euphoria, thereby meeting some deep need that I didn't know then and don't fully understand today.

But I am getting way ahead of myself, because for me life was truly grand. I had two older sisters who pulled me in my red wagon, played with me in their playhouse, and sometimes gave me as much misery as I did them. I had parents who loved me and were doing their personal best to "train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it" (Proverbs 22:6).

A CAREFUL BUT THOROUGH LOOK INTO
THE EVENTS OF OUR CHILDHOOD—AND
TO THE UNDERLYING MOTIVATIONS—
MAY WELL YIELD A DEEPER INSIGHT INTO
THE WHO AND WHY OF OUR LIVES.

CHAPTER 4

LAYING OUT THE CHANNEL

“For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”

—Matthew 18:20

OUR LITTLE VILLAGE OF BUDE, Mississippi, was a “Mill Town.” It was conceived and born for the specific purpose of being home to the Homochitto Lumber Company, which was, at the time, the world’s largest pine timber sawmill. The town was made up of housing constructed by the mill for the people it needed to man and operate a high-production, southern pine timber sawmill. It was 1911, and along with the formation of the mill and the town, there also came the school and the churches and the stores and post office. For the moment, it is the church I wish to speak of, “my church.”

I loved Bude Methodist Church back then as I do today. Our church was a place where older women, who smelled sweet and mostly were sweet, loved to grab me and hug me. I don’t think I was supposed to like it, but I figured out early on a hug was a pretty neat deal. Our church was a place where the men stood on the front steps and smoked and talked of six-man football, local and state politics, hunting for the elusive but delectable bobwhite quail, and sometimes they even talked about God! I’m sure we had a good gas heater somewhere in the church building, but the main thing I recall about the temperature of our church was the warmth of the people, their love for one another.

Laying Out the Channel

I know there is no perfect church. Our church, like every one before or since, was made up of people, and people aren't perfect. We are all like old prickly porcupines, and sometimes our quills stick others where they don't want to be stuck. But I don't remember the quills; I just remember the warmth of standing close. Bude Methodist was a place where I experienced real love and time with people who were free and generous with that precious, life-nurturing commodity.

Now, let's be clear. Not a single one of those grown-ups had any problem letting me know if I got "outside the banks" at church. A good paddling was readily available if I didn't want to get back in line. Yet I knew I was safe, loved, and cared for by those very same people who administered discipline. I knew the people there had my back. I learned what it means to be loved in a real way—not just the good stuff, but the correction too.

In addition to the love of all the people and the men and their talk that I loved to listen to, next in line were the real peanut butter and jelly sandwiches handed out at Vacation Bible School, made the right way—with the peanut butter and grape jelly blended together.

However, my fondest and most deeply felt and held memories from Bude Methodist involve my parents and singing. Now, neither of my parents was ever requested to sing a solo. We were not a particularly musical family, although my mother enjoyed playing the piano and came from a very musically talented family. In my heart today, I can hear and feel her playing and singing "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" as well as her nightly lullaby to me, which is still precious and fresh on my mind. I call my mother every night, and she always answers, "Hey, honey"—she's almost ninety-two and I am going on sixty-five—it causes a chemical reaction that can't be matched by any substance produced by man. She and I speak every night, and lately we have begun to sing some hymns during our phone calls, taking me back to those earliest days at our church.

My parents seemed to have arranged it for me to sit beside one of them or often sandwiched between the two of them. As I reflect back, I am quite certain that this cage-like seating arrangement was not accidental. Putting me between my parents was a well-conceived plan, no doubt born of experience, with a goal of keeping me in line, keeping me from "overflowing the banks" in the middle of church. They meant it for damage control, but for me it was, and is to this day, about feeling the sweet melody that flowed from somewhere deep

inside my mother and my father, from their very core, their spirits, as they joined in singing old hymns like “Blessed Assurance,” “Softly and Tenderly,” and “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms” together with many others.

To this very day, more than sixty years later, I can both hear and feel the old hymns flowing forth from deep within my parents. These songs weren’t just sung by them; the words, the thoughts, and the emotions were coming forth from their very souls. Mayes⁴ and Dorothy McGehee were not then, nor are they now, perfect in any way. But you could feel and hear that they truly loved God and wanted to get it right. I attribute that deep sense of the reality of their efforts in worship for imparting to me a real desire for a deep and abiding relationship with and faith in a loving, gracious, and holy God. This desire and relationship are true even—and especially—when life becomes a flood that leaves damage and destruction in its wake.

My parents and our church family at Bude (like all of us) certainly fall well within the “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” description Paul gave in his letter to the church at Rome (Romans 3:23, NIV). But in their imperfections, which were many (as is true of us all), I see that they were like what God said of David: “I have found in David the son of Jesse a man after my heart, who will do all my will” (Acts 13:22).

FOUNDATIONS ARE LAID EARLY
IN LIFE AND ARE ENDURING.

⁴ On January 21, 2014, my father, Mayes McGehee, in his ninetieth year on earth passed from this life into life eternal. I had written this chapter several years before his death. The last words my father ever spoke were these: “Come Thou fount of every blessing, tune my heart to sing Thy grace; streams of mercy, never ceasing, call for songs of loudest praise” (Robert Robinson, 1735–1790).

CHAPTER 5

THE RIVER ROARS

(A *LITTLE*)

*"For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there
you find disorder and every evil practice."*

—James 3:16 (NIV)

FOOTBALL IN THE MILL TOWN of Bude was played under the banner of the Bude Bobcats! The size of the community dictated a form of the game called “six-man” football. This mill town was no different from any other place, and football is as much about the men standing on the sidelines attempting to arrive at world-changing, lifesaving problem-solving as it ever was about the game itself. I can’t honestly pretend to remember much or anything about the games at Bude’s football field, but I can tell you about the men and the mascot.

The men stood on the bank by the field and pointed out everything the coach and the players didn’t get right. Then they would turn their attention to local town and mill politics and allow as to what were the errors of the politicians and the bosses. Of course, they also dug deep into an evaluation of whose bird dog could hold a point without flushing the covey of quail and whose could find and retrieve a dead bird better than the others.

The conversation I remember clearly was the one about the mascot and “Mayes’ boy.” As I roughhoused up and down the bank, rolling in the grass and dirt, no doubt undoing a good scrubbing that had

been given to me and my little boy clothes, they observed that it might be better to let the perpetually restless, snarling team mascot out of the cage and put Hollis in it. After a good laugh at that prospect, it was on to something else. I think I reveled in being the topic of attention even back then. I have no doubt that when I realized they were discussing me, I roared out my part all the more loudly and was ready to change places with the cat and go in the cage.

The adrenaline-rush junkie was being born without even realizing it. I can't count the times I have heard my parents, and particularly my father, tell me, "You are just a little too big for your britches, young man!" I think roaring at the Bude ball games was one of the ways I started having trouble "fitting in my britches," so to speak. The bent toward "drinking" was being born without me having even the slightest clue; it was defined by pride and selfishness, a lethal combination.

Someone in my family once said, "You began walking away from home at the age of two," and truthfully I guess I have never stopped. I spent much of my life searching for adventure and looking for the right cage, the right place for me in this "great big old wind-blistered world."⁵ There were people willing to give direction, but even at a very young age I thought I knew better than all those around me, and the early seeds of my independence were being laid. Another way to put it is that early on I erroneously thought I knew more than the others around me.

In Proverbs, the biblical book of wisdom, we find this warning: "Do you see a man wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him" (Proverbs 26:12, NIV⁸⁴). And then again we read, "The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice" (Proverbs 12:15).

THERE IS MUCH TO BE LEARNED IN PATIENT
ATTENTION TO THE LIVES AND WORDS
OF THOSE IN THE WORLD AROUND US.

⁵ Quoted by R. J. Poteet to a young Jim Lloyd in *Centennial*.

CHAPTER 6

THE RIVER RUNS EARLY

*“Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out
of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’”*

—John 7:38

IN MY HEART, I AM wed to the Homochitto for better and for worse, and my life has had ample portions of each. I have learned best and most from the “worse,” but I choose to focus on and cling to the “better.” As I pen these very words, I write from the bank of the peaceful and scenic Homochitto, where I have experienced many of my greatest joys and my worst failures.

The Homochitto is a beautiful river, and in many ways she represents the course of my own life. Given its nature, a river experiences drastic and tumultuous changes: it can be calm and serene, and it can be tumultuous. It has been very productive, but it also has periods and times when it is more destructive. I, too, have experienced these ebbs and flows—a “preaching and drinking” sort of up and down. I believe most of us can identify with a familiar river or stream if we are willing to give both a fair and honest look. I cherish and enjoy this great river and my life—the good, the bad, and the ugly!

The Homochitto and I have been involved throughout my life, as I have been in, on, and around this river since my very early childhood. I have walked its wide sandbars, fished its deep-green fishing holes, hunted in and along its wildlife-rich banks, treasure-hunted on its many rock bars, partied on and in its refreshing waters, loved in and

on it, and from it worshipped God from whom and to whom it ultimately flows. I have built camps and cabins on it, entertained myself and many others on it, laughed and cried on its timeless banks more times than I can possibly count. I have lived my life on the ancient lady we call Homochitto River.

I was introduced to the Homochitto by my daddy, Mayes McGehee, who loved the outdoors and especially the Homochitto. As a result of his extreme work ethic, though, he spent precious little time enjoying the river as an adult. As a young boy from Bude, he regularly slipped off to the Homochitto to swim, fish, and enjoy the river with his friends. My first time in the Homochitto with my father we went to the place we all know as the “Proby Hole.”⁶ This locally infamous swim hole is the site of many known drownings over the last hundred years. It is defined by a majestic clay bank on the north bank, a part of Rio Vista Plantation, owned by my Great Uncle Dan McGehee, longtime congressman from the state of Mississippi. The scenic multicolored clay bank extends out into the main stream of the Homochitto, creating a series of grottos and eddies and at times currents that people have tragically found to be deadly.

On this early trip to the Homochitto, when I was about four or five years old, my dad and I came to the Proby Hole from our side (the south side, owned by my grandfather Dr. Claude McGehee, a renowned country doctor). We crossed our large sandbar populated with heavily laden plum trees and lush blackberry and huckleberry bushes. I recall trembling, partly from fear and partly from cold, when Daddy put me in the Proby Hole the first time, but I quickly settled in and had the first of a lifetime of good times on the Homochitto.

My father and I have butted heads many times and in many ways, but this is a precious and special memory as he held me close and his warm heart and long arms showed his love and strength. I felt safe and loved in the arms of my daddy, a small-town boy turned WWII U.S. Marine turned young lawyer. That is a feeling I still have about my father today, and it is the feeling that easily prevails over

⁶ William Proby owned more than 3,000 acres divided by the Homochitto River. As I look out the window from where I am writing, I can see his gravestone: Born 1784, Died 1849. The “Proby Hole” is named for the longtime owner of both sides of what we call the Proby Hole. Since the early 1900s, the McGehee family has owned the area previously owned by William Proby—the north bank by Congressman Dan R. McGehee and the south bank by Dr. James Claude McGehee, brothers and both now deceased.

The River Runs Early

any other. My first trip to the Homochitto was an adventure, and it set the stage for a lifetime of adventures in the river of my life.

Long after first writing this chapter, I lost my father. I was in the room with him when he passed. Before I allowed the representatives from the local mortuary to remove him from his bed, I held him close for a moment, I guess trying to recapture the feeling I had when he held me close to his chest so many years before. He was trying to warm me from the spring coolness of the Homochitto; I was trying to hold him and stave off and deny the chilly reality of physical death. I was crying out in the same way Dylan Thomas once did for his father to “rage, rage against the dying of the light.”⁷ Yet, I am glad that I knew then and am reminded now that Mayes McGehee was no longer on that bed—he was being welcomed into the presence of his heavenly Father.

“And whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” —John 11:26 (NIV⁸⁴)

LEARN EARLY ON TO LOVE AND
APPRECIATE YOUR PARENTS IN ALL
THEIR BLESSINGS AND VARIOUS
IMPERFECTIONS—THEY ARE BATTLING
THROUGH LIFE JUST AS YOU ARE.

⁷ Dylan Thomas, “Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night.”

CHAPTER 7

SETTING HOOKS ON THE HOMOCHITTO

"Then God said, 'Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea . . .'"

—Genesis 1:26 (NIV)

WHEN I WAS ABOUT SIX or seven years old, my daddy would take my friends and me trotlining on the quiet and peaceful Homochitto. Late on a Friday afternoon we would go down to the river and set up camp. Then just before dark we would get in the river, setting out our hooks on a long cotton line stretched across the channel of the river. Just below the Highway 98 bridge and a little above the Proby Hole are two ancient craggy cypress stumps standing as two silent sentinels to the many changes in the Homochitto.

The plan we always followed was to set out the hooks and bait them just at dark, then return to the sandbar, build a fire of driftwood and river birch found along the banks, and wait for the fish to bite. Hours later, we would again strip off our street clothes, get naked, wade out in the cool waters of the river, and check our lines for fish. If you knew my father, you wouldn't have any trouble understanding my shock at this serious departure from his usual impeccable dress habits and extreme attention to decorum. It showed me he was just a regular guy, something I had not realized previously. He was and is, at heart, that little boy from Bude running to the river to be a more recent incarnation of Tom or Huck!

We didn't usually catch a lot of catfish, but we almost always caught a couple of big ones. Those fish were probably four to eight

Setting Hooks on the Homochitto

pounds, but when we waded out into the river, raised the line, and saw the dark image of a thrashing, good-sized catfish, it was like seeing a whale as far as I was concerned. I learned early on (and at the cost of a severe talking-to) not to pick up the line high enough to let the fish flop off. I just held the line. I could feel the tugging, and it tugged all the way into my heart, causing it to beat about eleventy dozen beats a minute. It was as if this process—man and fish—was thought of by me for the very first time. It was the stuff of great memories; I can feel those lines tugging in my mind and heart to this very moment.

Setting hooks on the Homochitto is one of my earliest memories of enjoying the river and its bounty. The Homochitto was beginning its journey in and through my life. It has been and it remains a journey of love. In like fashion with all true loves, there are times of heartache. But on this trip, I knew nothing of the heartache that would follow in time; I was just enjoying having my heart tugged. I was a long way from figuring out the “preaching” from the “drinking” or that such a thing even existed.

DON'T HURRY ANXIOUSLY THROUGH
LIFE; PAUSE AND TAKE THE TIME TO ENJOY
EACH BLESSING AS IT COMES. EVERY DAY
IS A GIFT TO BE TREASURED, EVEN—AND
SOMETIMES ESPECIALLY—THE BAD DAYS.

CHAPTER 8

THE SHORTCUT

(THERE ARE NO REAL SHORTCUTS IN LIFE)

“Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.”

—Matthew 7:13-14 (NIV)

I THINK ENTERING “THROUGH THE narrow gate” must be quite similar to coercing a river to stay in its banks. It seems this principle of the narrow way had begun to elude me even early on in life. The flooding and overflowing of the banks were recurring themes for me as far back as my tender years. One of those tender years I recall quite clearly is Christmas 1960; I was just a few weeks past my seventh birthday.

One of my biggest heroes was Johnny Unitas of the Baltimore Colts. I wanted, more than anything else, to be “Johnny U,” the man in the black high-tops. I was always pretending to be him, or if one of my friends beat me to him, then I was more than okay to be Raymond Berry, Johnny U’s favorite target. Johnny Unitas was only the greatest quarterback ever and maybe the best-known athlete on the planet; I guess he was everybody’s hero!

When anyone asked me, “What do you want for Christmas?” I had a quick answer to that question: “I want a Baltimore Colts uniform with #19 on the jersey!” Santa came through, and I got the uniform. Whether it had a #19 on the jersey or I made-believe that it did, I was

The Shortcut

happy regardless, and I am sure Sears, Roebuck and Company was a little bit better off for the wish fulfilled. There were many nights I slept in that jersey, and my little helmet too!

In our little neighborhood, one of the Christmas Day activities was to go around to each of the four or five houses nearby and see what everybody got for Christmas. Man, I was so proud to show off my new uniform and helmet. A few days after Christmas a bunch of us were gathered up at Mrs. Lola Lee Pritchard Crawford's house, visiting with our childhood "neighborhood boss" Lex Pritchard. We planned to have a big football game at the school circle, which was just down the hill. (We played most of our major, world-class sporting events there, except when we played tackle football on the courthouse lawn.)

We were all preparing for our big football game. Everyone was on bicycles, so we took off together for the school circle. We came to the intersection by Dr. Jack's house, where the safer and usual way was to go straight, pass by the Methodist Church, and then turn left onto the street that ran directly into the school circle. Everyone in our group went that way, the straight way, the safe way, the right way. Everyone, that is, except me.

When we got to the first stop sign, I decided to take the shortcut and turned down the hill in front of my parents' house. I took off from the stop sign, zipping down that hill with the wind whipping through my helmet and my jersey flapping on my skinny frame. I was determined to beat all those other guys to the circle. I knew the shortcut! I may have been the smallest, but I was going to be the first one there!

I went barreling down the hill toward the stop sign and, of course, had no thought of stopping. My only thought was maneuvering to make the turn at maximum speed. The next thing I knew, I was making an unscheduled "manned" flight into the chain-link fence around the high school football stadium at the bottom of the hill. That unscheduled flight originated when my bike hit a Volkswagen traveling west on Second Street (he had the right of way, and I ran the stop sign). My flight ended when my Baltimore Colts helmet hit the cyclone fence about three or four feet above ground level.

I walked away from what could easily have been a fatal collision (actually two collisions: the first when I hit the side of the Volkswagen, and the second when my head, encased in my new football helmet,

hit the cyclone fence). I can't say for sure (and that should tell you something), but I believe we had yet another trip to Franklin County Memorial Hospital for a little checkup. Amazingly, the only real wound I had was a cut to my right elbow from hitting the hood of Mr. King's Volkswagen as I passed over it on my flight to the fence.

¹² There is a way that seems right to a man [and a seven-year-old], but in the end it leads to death. (Proverbs 14:12, niv84)

I decided to go my own way, to take a shortcut. My "painting outside the lines" ended in what should have been a total disaster but, by the grace of God, was just another near calamity in my young life. I wasn't thinking, or I might have learned something from this revealing sneak peek about the choices I would make throughout my life. The lesson I see is simply this: There are paths that look like shortcuts and seem to be better, but the reality is, they are not. Quicker and/or shorter does not necessarily mean better and certainly does not mean safer. When I set out for the school circle, I had no idea I was about to have an encounter with a Volkswagen on the way to the big football game of December 28, 1960. We don't know what a day holds, but when we are looking at our choices each day, we can know that whatever looks like a shortcut almost surely is not!

In the writing of this account, I find myself taking a close look at my life—not just at what happened, but why it happened. What I see is not pleasing, but I am glad I finally had the courage to look and to ask myself some real tough questions like: "What were you thinking?" The short answer is I had a complete disconnect in the department of planning. I did the next easiest and most thrilling thing with no thought to a longer-term plan or consequences of poor choices. As I peer deep into my own soul and come face-to-face with myself, I see a darkness that is centered in seeking in my own way that which can truly be found only in God. Trying to find, from the resources of the world, the right filler for the God-sized hole in our lives is never a good choice. The Rolling Stones sang, "I Can't Get No Satisfaction," and truly what life has shown me in very plain fashion is that satisfaction, which is spelled P-E-A-C-E, can't be obtained from the things, places, or people of this world. The peace we all need, the peace we were all created to enjoy, is found only in a right relationship with Jesus Christ.

²⁸ Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. (Matthew 11:28)

The Shortcut

Softly and tenderly, Jesus is calling; calling, O sinner, come home.
Softly and tenderly, Jesus is calling; come home to Me, Hollis. Lord,
please have mercy and help me to find that rest in You that my soul
so deeply yearns for and has so futilely sought to find in my own
strength.

Go slow AND observe the world around you; be intentionally careful for your safety and the safety and well-being of others in the world around you. We don't have the right to be reckless or careless on the pretense that we are only hurting ourselves. Truly none of us is an island to himself.

CHAPTER 9

A RIVER OF FIRE

“But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.”

—2 Peter 3:10 (NIV84)

THE CONTROLLED USE OF FIRE was one of the earliest human discoveries, and its purposes were many, including a source of light and heat, a way to cook, clear forests, treat stone and other substances for the making of simple tools and implements, and burn clay for ceramic objects. However, like with most other things in life, that which can be used for good can also be used destructively; so has it always been with the use of fire.

The first fire I remember was at our home. It started off good, but suddenly turned in the other direction. I think it was in November 1961. I had on a brand-new red shirt with my initials on it; my mother had just finished making it for me. Excited about wearing my new shirt to school, I was warming up by the gas heater in the bathroom. The fresh starch in my shirt caught the attention of the gas flames, and all of a sudden it was a lot hotter than I wanted.

One of my sisters saw the flames and took quick action to put out the fire, saving my life. The fire destroyed my new shirt, but due to the quick actions of my sister, my back suffered only light first-degree burns. I don't recall us even going to the hospital. Dr. Jack was just next door, so I'm sure we just went across the street and saw him at

A River of Fire

home, or he may have come over to our house. What I mainly remember is that I never got to wear my red shirt to school.

Thinking back on that morning, it may have been just a lead-up to the “Great Fire of 1962,” which impacted my life and, to some extent, changed it forever. Fires leave visible and invisible marks, and the fire of 1962 left both types on my life forever. Sadly, it was not the last fire I would experience, but I am getting ahead of myself.

I believe it was around March 1962, and we were living in Meadville, having moved there in the summer of 1956. On this spring day, a young man from Bude, Douglas Shaw, had just finished cutting our grass and left for the day. I had been eyeballing the big-wheeled Yazoo mower and the red gasoline can all morning. I had imagined myself as the yardman, pushing the mower and refilling its tank from the big metal gas can. It wasn’t too many years later that my parents would have been happy for me to assume that role. Of course, when it became their idea, it ceased to be attractive to me.

My closest neighbor and lifelong friend Jack Hollingsworth (“Jacky” back then) and I were into chemistry. Our idea of becoming great chemists involved trying to mix together many different substances, anything we could obtain that seemed appropriate. We would gather things from under sinks, out of closets, just anywhere bottles and jugs of chemicals might be found. Our chemical protocol was fairly simple: mix the stuff all up and see what happens next. If it smoked, we felt like we must be getting close to a cure to a dreaded disease or a miracle that might change the world!

On this day, we got into the petro-chemical business. I had a quart fruit jar, and in it we had a mixture of gasoline, lighter fluid (the kind in the yellow cans intended for use in Zippo lighters), some charcoal lighter, and because it was the same basic color of yellow, we mixed in a touch of little-boy urine.

Jacky and I were in the middle of the dead-end street between our two houses, the street that ended at the home of my first and best friend ever, Philip King. We placed the jar in the middle of the street, leaving a safe burning area on all sides of the jar. We had our magnifying glass, and we were passing light through the jar in an effort to ignite the gasoline. When nothing exciting happened, we got some big wooden kitchen matches, and as they say, “things heated up quickly” from there. I actually had considered making sure there was a safe area around the gasoline, but I had not considered the gasoline that

had spilled down my pant legs when I was pouring it into the jar from the five-gallon gas can.

I poured some of the gasoline onto paper piled in the street, lit a match, and threw it on the pile. There was an explosion of sorts—a very distinctive and loud “whoosh!”—and then a lot of flames that I tried to run from, but it seemed I could not get away from them. In fact, the harder I ran, the hotter they got. Sarah, a lady who worked for Dr. Jack and Mrs. Colleen Hollingsworth, chased me down; she was bigger and slower, but she had a long wooden-handled broom she knocked me down with.

I tried my best to beat the flames off me, sort of like one does when a whole hive of red wasps or guinea wasps gets after you. No matter how hard I hit, no matter how many times I hit at the red-and-yellow flames, they didn’t leave and seemed only to get worse. This could have lasted only for seconds, but it seemed to be never ending. I couldn’t run fast enough, I couldn’t travel far enough, and I couldn’t beat hard enough to get away from or to get any relief from the fire. When Sarah got me down, I was in the side yard of our house, about fifty feet from where the fire had loudly and violently started in the middle of the street.

The moment was critical, life altering; the fire had to be put out immediately. The alternative was gruesome. My mother charged in at that critical moment. She, too, tried beating it out. That didn’t work. Ignoring her own safety and her own life, she covered my body with her own by plumping down on top of me. Her long blue pleated skirt had the effect of a fire blanket; the flames were retarded, seemed to be gone. Thanks to Mama, everything was all right and I felt like I was going to be okay. The fire was out. My mother immediately came to her feet to check on me, and she was stunned to see the flames instantly resume their full height and intensity! Without a thought, she threw herself back on the flames, whatever was necessary to save her child. Once again the flames immediately were choked out with the smothering, oxygen-depriving effect of the skirt. Yet again she sought to rise to check on me, and the moment she did, the flames were back to their ghastly work.

Then she grabbed my little blue jeans and began to pull them off. I resisted mightily because by then Susan and Lee Ann Hollingsworth, my neighbors who were “older women” and whom I idolized, had appeared. I was watching them through the flames, and I told Mama, “No! You are not going to pull my britches off in front of them!” Mama never blinked. Off came the pants, even though I was pulling back and

resisting with all my might. Thankfully, Mama won the tug-of-war, and the fire was out. When the fire went out, the real hell began!

I suffered third-degree burns to most of my right leg; also both of my hands were badly burned. I also had lesser burns scattered around and over my nine-year-old body. The treatment for a serious burn is somewhat nightmarish for anyone, but for a child it was especially tough. For the first week, we went daily to Dr. Jack's office where the gauze applied the day before was removed. The only way to remove it was to tear it loose because the raw flesh from the wound would seep through and bond into the mesh of the gauze. Just imagine the feeling of ripping a Band-Aid off a really, really tender bad sore and then magnify it about eleventy dozen times, and you are starting to get the feeling. Then imagine doing that daily over a whole leg, day after day after day.

My leg became seriously infected; it put the whole leg in danger of becoming gangrenous and requiring amputation. By God's grace, my leg was saved and I was healed. I bear those burn scars today, and my right leg is clearly smaller than the other, but truthfully I am greatly blessed to be alive.

More than fifty years later, when I think about it, I can still feel the burning heat and smell the very distinctive odor of burning gasoline on human flesh. I remember and can still see my little blue jeans after the fire; they were not consumed but were lined with what used to be the top layer of flesh from my right leg. The smell of burning gasoline and flesh is one that can neither be ignored nor easily forgotten, and so it is a memory I keep in a closet that usually stays securely closed. There are times when the door to those memories opens; thankfully it doesn't happen often.

Needless to say, I discovered a lot about fire through that experience. It involved an extended hospital stay and a recovery involving a number of surgeries. I lost the rest of the school year, but my teacher, Mrs. Ruth Ballard, and my mother worked in tandem to keep me from losing my third-grade year. Thanks to them I was able to pass successfully to the fourth grade. To this day, I still remember with great fondness and deep emotion my classmates walking up the hill from the school to have a party at my house. The line of friends and classmates coming up the hill (the very same one I took the shortcut on two years earlier) to our house was a key to the healing. It is a picture that stands stronger and more readily accessible than the more ghoulish one involving the leaping flames. I was still not able to walk at that time, but I remember being outside in a chair and seeing them

all trooping up the hill. It was a blessing then, and it is to this day. Tragically, I have had to help bury quite a number of my classmates since then. Theirs was a kind and gracious effort that half a century later still brings tears to my eyes and healing to my body and soul. Life is precious and must be cherished.

God blessed me to live through that and to be here to tell about it. Today, I can even make light of some of the events. When I think of some of the people who helped care for me—Mrs. Martha Kent (a brand-new but very tenderhearted nurse), Ms. Geenie Brazille (a tough old bird whose heart was touched by a little feller with a serious burn), and friends like Rickey Hill and others who pushed me in wheelchair races around the hospital—it is a great and sweet memory that outweighs the intense pain also associated with that lengthy hospital stay. I also remember and reflect that, much like the bobcat cage incident at the Bude football game, I managed to become the center of ongoing shenanigans while I was there, haunting the hallways at night in my wheelchair. I laugh out loud at myself.

Today I know without a doubt that discovering fire in that way was and still is a very traumatic experience. Unfortunately, this was far from my last bout with fire. As a child, I had been warned about fire and about gasoline. I didn't heed those warnings, and I suffered the consequences of my actions. Scripture warns, "Whatever one sows, that he will also reap" (Galatians 6:7). That is still true today, more than fifty years downstream. I guess, in the language of my cousin, I must have been "drinking" during that time.

Life deals us all some challenges, but it's up to us to decide how we will respond to life's breaks. If we truly trust God, we will see that all things work together for our good as we trust Him and that all things are an opportunity to serve and grow. Every day comes with some trouble. The key is to look up and learn to lean fully on God. He is here; we just have to be still and know that He is God and that He always does what He says He will do.

CHAPTER 10

COMING OF AGE ON THE HOMOCHITTO

“Bad company corrupts good character.”

—1 Corinthians 15:33 (NIV)

CAMPING ON THE HOMOCHITTO WAS just a way of life for us boys growing up around the Homochitto River back in the 1960s. One of our favorite campsites was just below the Highway 98 bridge⁸ over the Homochitto River. Our camping trips to that location flew under the flag of fishing, but these were also a country boy’s version of nightlife in Time’s Square or Bourbon Street. Viewing nightlife Franklin County style was an eye-opening experience for the group of young boys I grew up with.

For as long as anyone can remember, people have congregated below the 98 bridge for social purposes. During the daylight hours you’d see families picnicking with tubs of ice cold drinks and baskets of sandwiches and fried chicken and potato salad, homemade ice cream and cold-water melons. There were people swimming and sunning. There were church outings, young pastors with the kids from the church playing games and swinging from the rope swing in the swim hole just above the bridge at the site of the old bridge timbers. There was an area just below the bridge where politicians

8 One of the main crossings of the Homochitto is on U.S. Highway 98 just east of Bude, which is also the location of the beginning of my family’s ownership of Homochitto River frontage land. This is also the approximate location of one or more of the old ferry crossings of the river in the days prior to the first bridges. The log cabin my wife and I built is just east of this bridge.

gathered during election season. I remember one time in particular when, among others, the area was the site for a heated political debate in the 1959 race for governor.

When night falls on the banks of the Homochitto under the 98 bridge, the participants and the focus of fun on the river change dramatically. The area below the 98 bridge is made up of a myriad of roads and little trails through the pine timber and the prolific green thornbushes adjoining a very large sandbar. The result is that this relatively small area has a number of semi-secluded alcoves where, on any given night, one might find a family tent-camping, a small group of men gambling, some rowdy boys with a fire blazing and beer flowing, couples gathered for “parking,” and meetings of people whose goal was not to be noticed.

That area was our Times Square, our Bourbon Street—although we knew nothing of such places personally. We always camped just a little below the area of high activity, positioned perfectly to monitor and oversee all of these different nightlife activities under a wide-open night sky. We camped and fished and monitored our lines in the river and the lines of night moves being played out in front of us on the bank of the Homochitto River. We saw, heard, smelled, and, at times, tasted all of these activities from our secret position as we came of age from about age eleven to fourteen. This was all a part of my Homochitto education as the currents of the river continued to run through my life.

The Homochitto is more than just nightlife under the bridge and a fishing hole; it is also a grand highway, and we spent many, many days and nights traveling along the Homochitto Freeway. We called it “floatin’ the river,” which at different times meant an old inner tube, a plastic pool float, an old flat-bottom fishing boat, or a canoe. My first floats on the Homochitto were in some little blue plastic boats that belonged to family friends living on the river. My recollection is they were essentially like those little plastic swimming pools but shaped like little boats. We had a great time. I remember imagining we were in the raft of Huck and Jim.⁹ Regardless of the type of watercraft we used, we felt—or at least I did—that we were mighty explorers on historic ventures into wilderness territory along the Homochitto.

We made more float trips than I care to count. Sometimes it was a day trip from one bridge to another, and sometimes the trip was an overnight trip or one extending several nights when we traveled down

⁹ From Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

Coming of Age on the Homochitto

to the Highway 33 bridge. On a few occasions we went all the way to the Highway 61 bridge below Natchez, Mississippi. We would take along a few groceries, but mostly the food was there for the finding and catching. Whether it was a catfish taken straight from the river to the campfire, a few ears of corn from a nearby patch roasted in the shuck on our campfire, or a watermelon obtained by subtle means, there was plenty to eat along the Homochitto Freeway. I was learning the river, and its flow through me was increasing in volume year by year.

When I look back now, I see clearly that I made no effort to plan. I took things as they came and, with rare exceptions, always chose what seemed most exciting at the moment. Like the Homochitto, life was flowing along, but unlike the Homochitto, I gave no thought to what channel I was following. One of the biggest lessons I have learned from this look back is I did not have a life plan; I knew from an early age I wanted to be an attorney like my father, but I didn't know why or even if that was God's plan for my life. To navigate the river, you have to make choices about the current you will follow; to navigate life, you have to make choices about the path you will follow and who you will be influenced by. All of this went completely over my head. I thought only of the next adventure. Living life God's way requires prayerful planning and knowing when to pull back and when to plunge ahead, and as they say, "Failing to plan is planning to fail."

The Homochitto, like life, can be docile and it can be very dangerous; the key to river travel is learning to read the river, and the key to understanding life is reading and following God's blueprint—the Holy Bible—and thus knowing when to move forward and when to pull aside and watch from the bank for a while.

Life, like a river, rises and falls, with times of flooding and times of drought—knowing and acting on that knowledge wisely is the difference between successfully navigating life and being caught in the undercurrents.

CHAPTER 11

WATER OF LIFE: SOMETIMES IT FLOWS, SOMETIMES IT'S A STAGNANT POND

(THANKS BE TO GOD FOR THE DAYS THAT FLOW!)

"Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass, and taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing. Then he broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of the broken pieces left over."

—Matthew 14:19-20

THE BEST DAY OF MY childhood, the one that I remember in vivid detail, the one where everything went right, involved neighbors, a pond, fishing, and a bunch of little boys having a grand time! I want to tell you about that “best day ever,” about my neighbor who made that day happen for me, and about what it meant to be chosen to be included in such a great day!

My neighbor Mr. Graham Herring—he was larger than life to me. He founded the propane gas company known as Herring Gas. He and his home were open to us kids in the neighborhood. He had a way of always making me feel good about who I was. To my young eyes, Graham Herring knew how to live life on a grand scale, and he loved to share that with all the kids.

I lived just up the hill from the Herrings, and we were constantly back and forth between houses, although I am pretty sure I wore a deeper path at their door than they did at mine. I was and am very proud of my parents, but I think it's pretty normal for kids to also find grown-ups other than their parents to get close to during their formative years. Mr. Graham Herring was one of those men.

Graham Herring had a unique way of doing things on a scale that was larger and, well, just different from other grown-ups. He always welcomed the kids to join in with his various projects and activities. He had a sense of the fun factor, and he just seemed to know more about having fun (at least the kind a kid enjoys) than other grown-ups.

I recall one time when he bought several new Ford Mustangs (probably about 1966), loaded up his entire family, and drove them across the country, through Mexico, and down to British Honduras for swimming, scuba diving, and fishing, just some world-class fun on a family vacation. When the trip was over, he sold the cars down there, which not only paid for the trip but also made him money, and then flew everyone home.

Graham Herring was a unique man and a great neighbor to me and many others. I still feel a deep pain when I remember getting word of his tragic death from an accidental gunshot wound years later. I was a student at Ole Miss at the time, and I recall vividly the drive home from Oxford to be with his family and to say an earthly goodbye to a good friend who had been so kind to me and meant so much to me. When I think back on his life and death, it seems very strange to realize that when he died, he was years younger than I am now. He left us far too early!

I will never forget when he took me on my first quail-hunting trip. That led to me getting my first shotgun: a Browning Sweet Sixteen. Our hunting trip was a great day that he, his sons Steve and Mike, and I enjoyed together. But the day I want to tell you about is the day I went on the greatest fishing trip a young boy could ever imagine.

In my mind, the best part of the fishing trip was being invited! Mr. Graham Herring personally and specifically invited me, and it meant the world to me. It should be a great lesson to remember how important it is to all of us to be involved, to be welcomed, to be invited. We all need to reach out to kids of all ages; everyone wants and likes to be included—love is an action verb.

Mr. Herring had a farm just west of Meadville and just south of our local Middle Fork Country Club (which he was instrumental in the formation of). His farm joined the Middle Fork Creek on the east and Bunkley Road on the west. He had a really nice farm pond. To us kids, it was more like a lake, a great fishing hole, a perfect place to mix boys, sun, and fun! Believe it or not, that pond was big enough that more than a few young boys learned to water-ski in it, sometimes pulled behind a small motor boat and sometimes pulled behind a pickup truck driven along the bank. Those will have to be stories for another day.

On a Saturday morning probably in late spring or early summer about 1964, Mr. Herring poisoned his pond. At least that's what everybody called it back then, "poisoning your pond." He spread Rotenone (a chemical agent that lowers oxygen in water and forces fish to the top) around his pond and then ran the motorboats back and forth around the pond to ensure a good and thorough distribution of the chemical. This poisoning was done to clean all the fish out of his pond in order to restock it. Regardless of what they called it or why they did it, I can tell you we called it fun.

That was almost more fun than one little boy could stand in one day (I can remember everything about it). That "poisoning of the pond" turned into an awesome fishing trip for our group of young boys, with a big old party and fish fry right there on the bank of that pond! I can see and feel the water, smell the old pond mud mixed in with the smell of fish frying. Wow! I can go there right now. I just need my memory and a few moments with my eyes closed to escape to the bank of that pond well over fifty years ago now.

Go back with me to that special day. Picture the morning sun dancing on the bright surface of the pond; visualize this large farm pond that has an earthen dam at one end and comes to a point on the upper end, sort of like a teardrop, with the big end being the dam, the deeper end of the pond. Look out and see the men along the grassy banks setting up their metal cook pots and homemade butane burners, skinning knives being sharpened, small gray-green metal jon boats floating gently in the still, hot morning air. See washtubs full of ice and cold drinks, a whole flock of little boys going and coming through the water, and the mud grabbing bass and bream and some catfish. Imagine the controlled confusion of a dozen or so little boys

running and swimming and splashing around under the loose direction of grown-ups. Let the fishing begin.

The thought occurs to me that some might question the sport of fishing in this manner. Immediately I think of the story of the two friends—one is a game-and-fish officer and the other is a very successful fisherman. Every time the fisherman goes out, he returns victorious with a cooler loaded with fish. That's not sometimes; every time he goes, he scores big! After many times of asking to go along, one day the officer is allowed to accompany his friend on a fishing trip. They leave the boat dock in the damp pre-dawn darkness, arriving at a remote location just as day breaks. The fisherman gives the warden a cup of scalding hot coffee from his big silver thermos, and while the warden begins to sip at the coffee, the fisherman calmly reaches into his old weathered tackle box, pulls out a stick of dynamite, lights it, and hurls it into the lake. A violent explosion ensues, and fish rain down upon the shocked game warden. The speechless warden struggles to scream out, "You can't do that, it's . . ." The fisherman friend casually lights another stick of dynamite, throws it to his friend, and asks, "Are you going to fish or talk?"

Well, kind of like fishing with dynamite, you needed to be there, because I want to tell you that wrestling those big old bass and dodging turtles and snakes and just generally fighting through that thick pond bottom mud was truly a unique sporting event. Sort of mud-wrestling, country-boy style. So, you can either criticize or jump in and go fishing with us.

Picture about a dozen or so little boys, mostly ten-year-olds up to teenagers; skinny young boys with bony legs and backs all dressed alike in their standard uniform of faded blue jean shorts. Not a shirt or a cap or a shoe in the bunch, and nothing that even resembled sun-screen. Just the burning-hot Mississippi sun, pale skin, the sparkling pond, the long-settled muddy bottom being stirred up by the frenetic activity of so many little pairs of feet, and more fish than you could count. Can you see us yet?

Our fishing consisted of all of us boys swimming around the pond, grabbing fish with our hands while avoiding the loggerhead turtles and the water moccasins. Go out, grab some fish, hug them to your rib cage, and head to the bank to deposit your catch with the men cleaning fish; head out into the pond for another load. It was a grand, grand old time.

The day was a recipe for country boy fun of the highest order: a bunch of boys, a big farm pond, a day of bright Mississippi sunshine, lots of fish, boats and motors, and a pond bottom lined with mud that our feet dug into as the mud squished up between our toes. No time limit—just fish till you drop!

We caught more fish than you could “shake a stick at,” as the old folks were wont to say. Early in the day we mainly caught smaller fish, primarily young yearling bass and bream. I wouldn’t even try to guess how many, but as the day wandered on, it became routine to come out with multiple several-pound bass every time you ventured into the pond. As the day went on, the dark green, almost black, big old bass started coming up. They were mostly in the deeper water, and we watched that water like hawks looking for something to feed their little ones. We took off like world-class swimmers when a fish was spotted coming up for air. First come, first serve. It was a contest to see who could get the biggest and the most. But no one was keeping score; there were enough fish that no one missed out on the fun. There was plenty to go around. I don’t think it would be an exaggeration to say that we caught dozens of bass in the five- to eight-pound range, and maybe a little bigger. I have a picture to prove it!

As we caught them, there was a team of men (as I said earlier, Mr. Graham always did things on a grand larger-than-life scale) on the bank, scraping the scales off the fish, removing their entrails, cutting the heads off, and dropping them into boiling oil, rendering as delectable a result as can be found on God’s green earth: fresh bass, right out of the water, cooked up on the bank of the pond they spent their life swimming in. Not just fish but hush puppies and fried potatoes, tubs of ice-cold drinks immersed in large chunks of ice (from Mr. Johnnie Dunn’s Ice House in Bude), and freezing-cold water. A young ‘un could eat till he about popped, drink a “belly full” of cold drink, and then go back in the stirred-up muddy pond water for more fishing. There was no one there to fuss at you about taking a break after you ate. It was just hop out, grab a drink, a piece of fish, and some fries, and head back to fishin’ again!

At the end of the day, with the worst case of sunburn I ever had, we had a fish war—a jousting, if you will! Picture this: the two jon boats loaded with little boys and one or two big boys (I recall Ed Herring in one boat and Jamie Cummings in the other boat). Jamie’s boat

(the one I was in) had about a fifteen-horse motor on it. Ed's boat was supercharged; I think it had a thirty- or forty-horse Johnson Seahorse. The boats, each loaded with leftover dead, stiff-as-a-board, and harder-than-rock fish (mainly bream that had been too little to cook, or maybe the cooks just finally ran out of lard to fry them up in). We would go to opposite ends of the pond and then like two jousting knights, we would go at each other, except that instead of horses and lances, we had motorboats and weapons of hard, cold, stiff, prickly fish with needle-sharp fins!

Now if you don't think one of those weapons thrown by an exuberant young 'un from a boat traveling at high speed (probably fifteen miles an hour) and hitting you in the chest or head will make a sore spot, then I guess you just don't know too much about pond wars. Whoo wee! Those fish would knock fire out of you. It was just the best kind of fun. The knots on your head and the blood from being hit with the harder-than-rock dead fish, the hands so sore from the fish fins and scales all day, the legs so tired from wading in the mud—those were just our "campaign ribbons"! It was the greatest day a little feller could ever have. I was chosen, and I will never forget that day. That's my story, and I am sticking to it.

We don't get to have these days very often; in fact, we only get a few really special days in a normal life. This day was surely one of those. Life is full of challenges, but there are those days when it all just seems to flow right, and I think God gives us those as times of refreshing. This great day of fishing was one of those really special days. The greatest part of it for me was being chosen to participate.

The other thing this memory highlights is the desire to be included, the need for acceptance and approval. We all want it. We all seek approval, and even though there are always some folks who do great things like invite a little boy or girl to a fun time, there are still many times when each of us feels alone. There are times when the world turns a cold shoulder to us, and even when it doesn't, we are inclined to imagine that we are being slighted. The real problem is not with them; it's with us. We try to meet our needs in a world that is not equipped to handle or capable of truly fulfilling them. The sooner in life we realize and begin to enjoy God's provision, His invitation to join Him, the sooner we will realize that the only true satisfaction, the only lasting peace and fulfillment is found in being rightly related to God, which is by grace alone, through faith alone,

in Christ Jesus alone. It's a great day when we are included in special events with others, but we have to fix our hope on God's promises that He will never leave us alone.

Jesus said (and is still saying to you and me today), "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28, niv).

Help me, Lord, to be thankful at all times and
to breathe deeply in those sacred moments
when all seems right with the world.

CHAPTER 12

JUMP FOR YOUR LIFE

(*OF LITTLE BOYS AND CHOO CHOO TRAINS*)

*"Train a child in the way he should go, and when
he is old he will not turn from it."*

—Proverbs 22:6 (NIV84)

PURE INSANITY. IT IS PURE insanity to stand on the railroad tracks in the path of an oncoming train. But that's just what we did, and all in the name of fun. It was right up my alley. It may well be one of the crazier things I ever did, but at the time it was just another opportunity to be in the middle of something exciting, a potential collision between little boys and an onrushing, mammoth diesel locomotive engine of the Mississippi Central Railroad!

One of the things I enjoyed at Bude Methodist Church was how it gave us boys a chance to get together and plan our fun. Most of the plans hatched there involved the church itself and good activities. Our church was a loving and nurturing place; we had great Sunday school teachers, and our pastor in our younger years was Bro Jack Loflin, a young, excited, energetic, and very committed pastor who loved working with all the kids and the Homochitto River.

My family had been a part of Bude Methodist Church for a long, long time, almost since it was founded. Another family with many similarities was the Charles H. Herring family, and one of my best childhood friends, Howard Herring, was a part of that family. We

enjoyed many activities together, and many of those in the early days were on Sunday afternoons after church. I often went home with Howard, and we would eat and play the rest of the day away. The Herring house was a fun place to go; we rode horses, went to the river, and worked with cows—all irresistibly good stuff to a country boy.

One Sunday morning in the spring of 1964, my friend Howard was telling us about a new plan he had for us. Mike Suber and I were all ears as Howard fed us tidbits of his new game plan. He assured us we would love his plan, said that his Uncle Pete (Pete Herring, brother to Graham and Charles "Bug" Herring) told him about it, and it was something Uncle Pete had done as a boy. Howard remarked that if it was good enough for Uncle Pete, then we should give it a try because his Uncle Pete knew how to have a good time.

Howard's family lived east of Bude, in Eddiceton. The Herring property, now known as Ridge Point Ranch, was divided by the steel rails of the Mississippi Central Railroad. The unique ridge point home and a good deal of the surrounding acreage lay north of the tracks, with the remainder of the land and the Homochitto lying south of the tracks. Crossing those tracks to hunt, work cows, feed cows, or head to the river was just an everyday thing at Howard's house. It was high adventure and great fun to me—and I'm sure to many others who visited that home.

When church let out, we headed to the Herring house for lunch, but lunch was not the main fare. Our anticipation lay in Howard's new plan for Sunday afternoon fun! After Sunday dinner was done, Howard led us out to the end of the ridge his parents' home was located on. That ridge ended in a rocky outcropping overlooking a small winding branch and the railroad trestle bridging the small creek. The trestle stood about eight to ten feet above the small creek and its adjacent sandy banks.

"All right, boys, here is what we are going to do. In a little while the freight train will be coming through from Natchez headed toward Brookhaven. Now, when we hear the train coming, we will get out on the railroad trestle, and then we will wait until it gets real close and wave our hands and shout at them to stop, and when the train gets close, we will shout and holler for the train to stop. Now, we can't move a muscle until they throw on the emergency brakes, and then right before they think they are going to hit us, we will jump off the

trestle! That's my plan. We will jump off into the sand down below and hide and watch them go crazy trying to figure out what happened to us." That was Howard's plan.

We did just that. We hunkered down on the hill and waited until we heard the train heading east, and then we ran down the hill, jumped up on the trestle, and waited for the train to get to us. We did just as Howard said, waving our hands, hollering, and stopping the train. It was great! In fact, we liked it so much that we did it every Sunday for about a month, as I recall. It became a point of honor about who was willing to stand there the longest. We got so brave that we would wait until they hit the other end of this little short railroad trestle, until we could see the "white of the eyes" of the engineer. The grace of God is all that kept our stupidity from killing us.

In the end I did get "killed" when my daddy found out. What I didn't know (that would fill a library) was that my daddy did some legal work for the railroad, and it just so happened the railroad investigators called on my daddy to help them get this problem tended to. They told him where it was happening, how it always happened on Sunday afternoon, and how it involved three or four young boys. Daddy stopped them and said, "I don't need anything more. I know what and who and exactly how to stop this." He told them, "I will bring this foolishness to a screeching halt." Lord knows he was right as far as I was concerned. When he got through with me, I never thought about or even dreamed about stopping another train.

Pure insanity! What was that all about? Little boys like to have fun, but most little boys don't stand in front of speeding locomotives to do it. Looking back now over the span of the past six decades, I see that I made a habit of putting myself in harm's way, in the path of great danger. It was a pattern of behavior and attitude that repeated itself many times over the years. I guess today it might well be called "extreme sports," but back then it was just pure crazy. What I see today looking back was a burning desire to fit in, to be included—the desire to fill the God-sized hole in my soul with the things of the world, especially excitement. It didn't work; it doesn't work; it can't work. It's foolishness trying to do in our own way what only God can accomplish for us and in us. I have tried the "do it my way" version of life, and it always results in disappointment, shame, and hurt for you and others. The idea that we can choose our own path because

“it’s my own life” is a fallacy. Our choices in life impact the actor but also many others as well. Following my plan instead of God’s is to choose a fool’s path.

²⁰ He who walks with the wise grows wise, but a companion of fools suffers harm. (Proverbs 13:20, niv84)

Being desperate to fit in will often lead us to follow people and trends that are neither safe nor sensible.

We need to understand that only God is truly wise, and He has given us a great tool, the Holy Bible, to light the way. We just need to use it.

CHAPTER 13

LIFE'S LESSONS SOMETIMES REQUIRE DIFFERENT CHANNELS

"For many are invited, but few are chosen."

—Matthew 22:14 (NIV)

"WHATEVER YOU DO, DON'T DO anything to hurt their feelings or let them feel left out in any way!" is what many say today about raising and influencing children. Well, I am not a philosopher, and I certainly am not a child-rearing expert. But I would like to share with you a much different story. It's a great story, but it's real, and like life, it comes with some difficult times—some thorns amidst the roses. It is in the difficult, challenging moments of life that we truly begin to live life and grow as God would have us to (even if it takes some of us a little longer to get the good out of the lessons). Someone with far more insight into such things than I said something like, "God whispers to us through the good days and shouts to us in our pain." In fact, quite a while back, long before anyone was making up clever sayings, God said, "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33, niv).

I grew up in Meadville, Mississippi, a small town of about three hundred people in the southwest corner of the state. I always told people that Franklin County was "the center of the universe." I guess for me it always has been and always will be. It was a great place to grow up, and in that process I experienced many of life's growing-up

moments, more often than not brought on by my own foolishness. One thing it did—at least if I listened—was teach me about life.

Our local Little League baseball team was the Meadville Cardinals, named after the much-loved St. Louis Cardinals. I would say that our local version of the Cardinals was a lot more relevant to our daily lives most of the time. I don't know what it was like playing for the St. Louis version of the team, but playing for the Meadville Cardinals was about the best thing a boy could want to do. I aspired to be a Meadville Cardinal, and this is the story of what that entailed.

The selection process used to pick the Meadville Cardinals had its painful moments, but I wouldn't trade it for any other system. If you make it as a Meadville Cardinal, it's your place for life: once a Meadville Cardinal, always a Meadville Cardinal.

This is how it worked. Beginning in late February and early March, we would hurry down to Mr. Glenn Hollingsworth's Meadville Rexall Drugstore on Main Street, across from the Franklin County Courthouse and right next door to Fred and Jewel Young's City Café. We gather up there to "catch the truck." The truck was the coach's truck, and that's how we all got to practice. Mr. Roy Cobb, a wiry, wizened-eyed, pipe-smoking, old house painter, would roll into Meadville in his old pickup truck, pull up in front of the drugstore, and about twenty of us would pile into the bed of that old truck. This wasn't just a "Little League" truck; in the back there would be most anything you can imagine, including all the necessities of a house painter. But for sure there was an old green World War II duffle bag, and inside of it was real treasure: balls and bases and bats and gloves! I couldn't wait for Mr. Roy to unload the bag. If you were lucky, he would let you tote it when we first got there or pack it up when it was time to go.

The truck would take this laughing, joking, rock-throwing bunch of boys out to "Cardinal Stadium," about a mile west of town out on the Mile Branch Road. Our practice facility was on the right just before you got to Mr. Dave Booker's peanut and barbecued coon sandwich shop. When we got to the field, we would gather around that old homemade chicken wire backstop, and that's where balls, advice, and positions were handed out. For the next thirty days or so we would repeat this event every afternoon. It was great fun—fun being with your friends, fun riding in the back of the truck, fun drinking a Coke filled with salty peanuts on the way out, and fun having ice cream to cool you off when you got back to the drugstore. Oh yeah, we did play

Life's Lessons Sometimes Require Different Channels

ball, too! I have to think hard to recall anything more enjoyable than the daily routine for the Meadville Cardinals. No matter what had happened last year, when we started again in the spring, there was hope: "This will be my year!"

Our local Little League was made up of six teams: Meadville Cardinals, Bude Braves, Providence, Roxie, Independence, and Pine Knots. Each team had only fifteen uniforms they could give out, so if you didn't get picked in that top fifteen, you didn't play—you didn't make the team. There were always more than fifteen of us wanting to put on that Cardinal uniform. When it was time to start playing games for real, Mr. Roy (later it was Mr. Cameron Stokes and then Mr. Lester Stroud) would call us all together, and he would read from the list those who would get uniforms. These were good men, men giving of their time and their resources, trying to teach us to play ball and how to compete in a pretty competitive undertaking: Little League baseball, Franklin County style—and ultimately life itself!

Now when I was nine, and when I was ten, and when I was eleven, my name was never called. I didn't get a uniform; I didn't make the team. Once the team was picked, if you weren't on it, you had a lot of free time in the afternoon. If your hide was tough enough, you would still go to the drugstore in the afternoon, but you had to watch the rest of the guys drive off with the coach and the bag of balls and bats. I won't tell you that it wasn't painful not being chosen because it was. It hurt a lot to be on the outside looking in. The boys chosen were still your good friends, but they were busy with practice, team activities, and the games. The most painfully obvious sign was the uniform; on Friday nights they all had on their uniforms and you did not—a bright and uncomfortable difference.

But here's the rest of the story. When I was twelve years old, I was chosen, and I about busted at the seams, which was nigh unto impossible since I weighed about seventy pounds or so. I knew then, and I certainly know today, that I wasn't in the league with my heroes like Pee Wee and Doodle Smith, Bill Sullivan, Danny Roy Myers, Ricky King, Mike Suber, Mike Priest, Johnny Monroe, and many others. But I had a uniform, I got to play, and I didn't think it got any better than that!

I think it's good to have teams where everyone gets to play. But I also think there is a lot to learn from not getting to play. Some of those lessons have helped me through life. I have also learned that some things aren't nearly as important a few years down the road as they

seemed at the time. It was crushing to be told you didn't make it, but crushing can be a good thing. Crushing is as much a part of real life as making the team is, and in the long run it can sometimes be more educational. Life comes with some crush; in fact, Jesus said, "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33, NIV).

I loved being a Meadville Cardinal, and I love the lessons I learned from many of the people I was exposed to. They are a part of the fabric that makes up my life. Most of all, I am blessed by the grace of God to be born again in Christ Jesus. He chose me out of a life of sin to be "a brand plucked from the fire" (Zechariah 3:2). He uses the lessons of life I have learned to make me more useful to Him. I have a long way to go, but I thank God for giving me the chance, for keeping me here to keep trying and working at this game of life. I am glad I am a Meadville Cardinal, but much more so I am glad to be a born-again child of the living God.

²⁸ And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28, NIV)

The challenges of life are there to teach us a lesson. It has been said, "If the mountain were smooth, you wouldn't be able to climb it."

CHAPTER 14

THE GREATEST GIFT EVER GIVEN

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."
—John 3:16

I KNOW WITH AN ASSURED historical certainty the Baptists planned the revival. I don't know who had the idea to have a youth revival at Meadville Baptist Church in the spring of 1967, yet I can almost imagine the meeting and the motions and seconds and all in favors. The committee put feet to the revival plans, but long before there was a committee, a Meadville Baptist Church, or even an earth, God had this thing all laid out.

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ⁴ even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love ⁵ he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. (Ephesians 1:3-6)

Little did I know that before the world as I knew it was founded, God knew on this Friday night I would walk from my house on Olive Street in Meadville, Mississippi, to a youth revival God planned and chose Brother Gary Googe to lead. God knew I would sit in the back row as far from the action as I could get yet still be in the church

sanctuary. There wasn't a seat in that sanctuary, or even this earth, that would have kept me from the finished work of Christ Jesus.

⁴⁴ No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day. (John 6:44)

In other words, I had neither the inclination nor the moral or spiritual ability to come to the Lord Jesus Christ on that Friday night—or any other night—except that I was drawn by God the Father, who graciously gave to me the desire and ability to have an eternally significant meeting with Jesus Christ on that very night.

I was listening, but I won't pretend that I was not distracted by my friends all around me, including my best friend Bill Sullivan, who was sitting with me. It seemed like I mostly floated up to the front of that sanctuary and by the grace of God placed my faith, also a gift from God to me, in Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the greatest gift ever given, and for me this was my night to be adopted into the family that is without end—my forever and ever family—the family of Almighty God.

⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

I was created by God in eternity past, but I was adopted by God as His son, through Jesus Christ, on a Friday night at the Meadville Baptist Church in the spring of 1967. I have, since that night, on many occasions been outside of the fellowship of my heavenly Father, but never once have I been outside His family. We are all created by God, but no person can be reconciled by God but that they are born again.

¹ Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ² This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him." ³ Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." ⁴ Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" ⁵ Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." (John 3:1-6)

This was the night I first "heard" God speak to me personally. I went from being contented on the back row to being at the altar

The Greatest Gift Ever Given

on my knees, weeping before the Great I Am! Just as clearly as any conversation Bill and I might have had earlier in the evening or any conversation you and I have ever had with anyone, God said to me: "You will serve Me." Since I was old enough to know, probably about three years of age, I knew I would be a lawyer. God gave me a change of plans that night. I think at some level the whole rest of my life has been a wrestling match—that I have consistently lost—over that very brief but clear conversation with God.

¹² There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death. (Proverbs 14:12)

GOD WORKS ALL THINGS ACCORDING
TO THE COUNSEL OF HIS WILL.

CHAPTER 15

THE SHOOTING

(Boys Will Be Boys)

“Wisdom calls aloud in the street, she raises her voice in the public squares . . . But since you rejected me when I called and no one gave heed when I stretched out my hand . . . I in turn will laugh at your disaster; I will mock when calamity overtakes you.”

—Proverbs 1:20, 24, 26 (NIV84)

A DREAM COME TRUE . . . and he offered to pay us to participate! I believe it was 1966, and I know it was a hot July day. Five or six of us ten- to thirteen-year-old boys were standing out in front of Mr. Verne Sullivan’s house scheming on what we might get into next, and suddenly we had an offer we couldn’t refuse.

Mr. Rudolph Thornton, father of one of the boys, pulled up in his green Ford pickup and started asking us boys what we were doing. He said, “I need you boys”—he was the owner and operator of a number of jukeboxes, pinball machines, and pool tables and placed his machines in various little country stores and juke joints—“to take my truck and go down around Crosby and collect the money out of my machines and move a juke box for me, and I will pay every boy that helps.”

Could this really be happening? Did he just offer to pay us to load up in his truck and drive ourselves down to Crosby (two counties over) and go to these night spots we have heretofore only heard of

The Shooting

and collect money and maybe even hang out a little bit? We had to pinch ourselves. "Uh, yes, sir, Mr. Rudolph, we will be happy to take care of this little job for you." He didn't have to mention money; we would have taken up a collection and paid him for the chance to go off in a pickup truck (with no adults) down into Wilkinson County. That was such new territory to most of us that it might as well have been a foreign country.

The oldest one in our group might have been barely fourteen, and here we were about to take off to parts unknown in someone else's truck—no adults, cigarettes to smoke, and adventure to enjoy. And we'd get paid for that! If Mr. Rudolph had a little Tom Sawyer in him, he could easily have gotten us to whitewash that fence for nothing. It may be difficult to imagine today, but in 1966 no one even looked twice at a bunch of kids driving a pickup truck through the back roads of southwest Mississippi.

Mr. Rudolph's son, Robert Lynn Thornton, about age twelve, was in charge of the trip; he knew where the joints were and how to move the machines around. I guess you might say the rest of us were just there for extra muscle, which is hilarious considering the biggest boy in our group wouldn't have been any more than five foot six and no more than one hundred pounds soaking wet. We didn't care. We had a truck, a little money, cigarettes, three counties' worth of back roads, a hot summer's day, and the imagination of what all we might see, touch, hear, and just be around. We were off, and it was going to be a grand adventure. This was a first for us, and we were beside ourselves.

This was high adventure of the highest order for us—just being with friends, no adult supervision, able to smoke at will, say whatever we wanted, and speculate about what we might see and do. When we woke up on that hot summer day, we didn't have a clue so much adventure was about to fall in our laps. We thought it would be just another typical summer day of riding horses, fishing in the pond, or swimming in the river and maybe going up to Ananias' to get a cold soda pop. We had no idea we would be going off on such a trip as this.

Now July in Mississippi is spelled H-O-T, real hot. Not just hot, but hot and sweaty. If you are not from Mississippi, then you need to reorder your thinking about what humid is because July in Mississippi means humidity of about 110 percent and an ambient temperature of ninety-eight degrees or more. Because of the heat, because it's what we had, and because we were still just little boys, we were dressed in

our usual summer uniforms: cut-off blue jeans, no shirts, no shoes. But we were ready for commerce, ready to serve! We looked like the picture of who you definitely would not want to send out to take care of your business, any business. But off we went.

We had the machines moved and set up and the money collected, and we were on easy street, headed back in the direction of home, but in no hurry whatsoever. We were traveling through the back roads and came to the Homochitto community, made famous by the Poole Family and its various branches of Ole Miss and NFL fame. (The Poole family is memorialized in the school records, the record books, and more recently in books written, in whole or in part, by Paige Cothren and Jimmy Carroll Robertson.)

When we came to the Brushy Creek bridge, we decided to stop and cool off in the nearby Homochitto River. I doubt any one of us owned what people today call a swimsuit; anytime we took to the river, we just shucked our cut-off blue jeans and went skinny-dipping. There were rarely any girls around, but if there were, we would just swim in our shorts.

So, I want you to try to visualize this scene: Ford pickup, five or six little boys, the bigger boys in the front, the rest of us in the back. Smoking, laughing, telling tales, and reminiscing over the afternoon's events. We got to the creek bridge on this very small, very lightly traveled country back road, and we eased over to the side and made an executive decision to go for a swim in the river. Now imagine all those little boys piling out of that truck, scampering down the bank to the creek, and galloping down the creek to the river about one hundred yards or so down the creek. All these little boys shedding their cut-off blue jeans as they went, dressed like they were born—in nothing at all.

I, however, had a little personal business to tend to before heading down to the river. The bridge railing seemed like just the right height and place to more comfortably accommodate that business. Now, imagine one more little boy hanging back too, kind of lurking in the shadow of the bridge. His reason for hanging back was a little different; he had a plan for a little fun in his mind, a chance to scare the one doing his business up above over the bridge railing. Unknown to me, Howard had found a .22-caliber pistol in Mr. Rudolph's truck. Not just a pistol but a true, honest-to-goodness "Saturday night special" nine-shot .22-caliber revolver with about a two-inch barrel. A light but very dangerous weapon, completely unreliable in every way, it may

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have served Mr. Rudolph's purposes just fine, but in the hands of kids, it was more dangerous than dynamite.

Howard's plan was to scare me by shooting in my vicinity. Now, imagine I, personal business well under way, was deep in thought. A shot rang out. It wasn't aimed at me, but this "Saturday night special" was not designed to hit what it was aimed at; it was subject to shooting off anywhere. You don't actually aim one of these; you sort of point, and the bullet goes where it goes. On this occasion, where the bullet went was not near but *into* me, while my britches were down, while I was tending to personal business over the bridge rail.

Just a fraction of a second after that shot rang out, a loud holler rang out, and I fell over onto the bridge. Business was still in process, bleeding had started, shouting had stopped, and Howard was thinking, "Oh no! I've killed Hollis!" The other little boys were running back toward the bridge, shouting, "Is he dead?" "Where did you hit him?"

Howard made it to the bridge first. He was shaking so badly that without him even knowing it, he was continuing to pull the trigger on the fully loaded nine-shot revolver, and ricochets were zinging off in every direction. Thankfully, this time he missed.

The whole group arrived on top of the bridge just behind Howard. They were mostly still naked, but pulling on their shorts. From the southwest, a car was coming, and a plan was quickly hatched: Somebody stop the car; somebody help get Hollis out of the road. We have to head this off because we are going to get in a heap of trouble if this gets around! Our parents will probably take our guns away!

The shot fired to scare me definitely did that, but that fear wasn't a thought, it was a feeling—a burning feeling right below my left buttock down into my thigh. Now Howard's version is that the bullet that hit me ricocheted, and only part of the bullet got me.¹⁰ My version is: Shot is shot, and when you get shot, it is hot, hot, hot! I was shot; Howard was not! The hole was there, the blood was there, and we had

10 Howard always tried to play this story down by claiming that the bullet only hit me on a ricochet, and it wasn't as bad as a direct hit. I can't say he's right, and I can't say he's wrong. What I can tell you is that whatever part of the bullet went in my butt felt like a burning-hot poker from you know where, and it hurt like a rascal for a while, but later on it healed up good. (The bullet actually went in below the gluteus maximus cheek, but it just sounds better, and considering what was going on immediately prior to the shooting, it just always seemed like a "butt shot"—a little tweaking of the story for maximum effect seems to be the storyteller's duty.)

to do something—and as far as I was concerned, that needed to be done fast, preferably sooner than later.

The car coming along was traveling down the long, straight stretch south of the Brushy Creek bridge. It was a yellow Mustang headed toward us. Although we didn't know, or care, at the time, the driver was Becky Herring, the older sister of one of us. One of the group was dispatched in a full sprint to stop the car before it got to us, and the rest of the group was engaged in dragging the carcass of the bleeding, screaming, still pooping twelve-year-old off the roadway, down the embankment, and under the bridge for safekeeping until they could figure out what to do with me and the oncoming traffic.

We got the oncoming car delayed long enough to get me out of the way. Now that the road was empty, what to do with me? The first thing that was decided was, "Whatever we do, we can't let anyone know that Howard has shot Hollis in the butt!" I will leave it to your imagination who came up with that plan, although admittedly it served us all well in the long run. First aid had to be administered, and you have to give this group credit for its resourcefulness that day. We were not anywhere close to a medical facility, a drugstore, or even a medicine cabinet. Yet, this group of young trauma surgeon wannabes acquitted themselves quite well, albeit their methods were a little unorthodox.

Gunshot wound triage on a country back road with no medical training, no medical supplies, and no grown-ups is a daunting challenge. This group was well up to the task. As a side thought, can you imagine this event occurring today? It would be on CNN, and they would have experts trying to analyze the situation. That would cause a cable news meltdown!

Here was the game plan: There was a country store just up the road run by Mrs. Huff. We drove up to the store, and Howard and one of the Sullivans went in and purchased the following (which everyone should have in their emergency "shot in the butt with a twenty-two" first aid kit): iodine, cotton, long wooden sticks (they look like Q-tips but only have cotton on one end), and some white tape. We departed for a back road where we could doctor me, get our stories straight, and get ready to head back to civilization.

When we got to our stopping place, they laid me out on the tailgate and swabbed the hole out with iodine several times. Then they poured in a little extra iodine and taped the hole shut (maybe stuffed a little cotton in there too for filler). Then Howard announced that I

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had to practice walking so that no one could tell I'd been shot in the butt. So I got up and put on my very best "just got shot in the butt but don't want anyone to know it" walk. If there was one thing I wanted, it was to fit in and please my peers, and if it meant roadside gunshot assistance and keeping it quiet, then it was completely okay with me.

After walking practice, everyone was satisfied with my performance, and we proceeded back to Mr. Verne's house. We turned over the truck and money (less the cost of gunshot first aid provisions) and all departed for our various houses. I don't recall exactly, but it seems as if Mr. Rudolph might have dropped me off in town, probably down by the feed store a few blocks from my house.

Under any circumstances it's very difficult to keep a secret if more than one person knows the story. You add in that there were about six who knew the story, all under fourteen years of age, and it's a small town—and it seems like keeping the matter secret would be an impossibility. But Mission Impossible was accomplished because, to the very best of my knowledge, the first grown-ups to know this story were my parents after I told them when I was about thirty years old. There is one exception: my neighbor Dr. Jack Hollingsworth. A long time after the shooting but within a year or so of the event, I was in his office by myself one day and asked him about confidentiality and if I could ask him something in confidence. I can imagine his thoughts running wild with that lead-in, and then I laid it out: "What do you do for a gunshot wound a year or so after the event?" He made me tell him the whole story, and when he got his composure back, he said, "Well, I expect it would cause more damage to try to get that little bullet out than it did going in. Let's just leave well enough alone." He never told the story to a soul that I know of; he was a stand-up guy.

Yes, boys will be boys, and to an extent, that is what is happening in this story. However, now that I look back on the overall pattern, I also see a consistent bent to doing that which I knew not to do and a steady result of bad outcomes. I am writing here of my life, but all of us boys were raised hearing the Word of God and the wisdom of God. So I was without excuse, and it just seemed, at least in my case, that I habitually turned away from God's wisdom to the foolishness of my own thinking. I had a long way to go before the truth of "His thoughts are not our thoughts"¹¹ would ever sink into my way of thinking. I have come a long way, but even today I often find myself

11 See Isaiah 55:8.

trying to outthink God's plan. Often back then I didn't even seem to understand the questions, much less the answers. I think the progress is that today I typically at least understand the issues/questions and what is the right path and seek to get on it, although trips into the ditch still do occur regularly.

⁹ The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom. (Proverbs 9:10)

The Bible says, “Be still, and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10)—great advice and sometimes simply to “be still” is advice enough.

Learning that we are human beings not “human doings” is an important lesson.

CHAPTER 16

“WHATEVER YOU DO, DON’T GET IN THE BOAT!”

*“A man who remains stiff-necked after many rebukes
will suddenly be destroyed—without remedy.”*

—Proverbs 29:1 (NIV84)

HERE IS A RECIPE FOR twelve-year-old fun: gather up three or four young boys; mix in some fishing poles, a boat and motor, and a lake; put them all together; step back; and get ready for the fun. Well, fun for them, but for the grown-ups having to abide them, probably not so much so.

It was the summer of 1966. Bruce Hollinger, David Berkley, our grown-up friend Wade Creekmore, and I went on a fishing trip to Eagle Lake in the Mississippi Delta just a little south of Rolling Fork, Mississippi. It was an adventure and it was great fun, but for those sponsoring the trip it was most likely considered a disaster.

We divided up into two groups for the fishing: Wade and Bruce in the bigger boat with the really fast, bigger motor, and David and I in the smaller boat with the smaller motor. This and one more time would make twice that I had ever run an outboard motor on my own. The two boats were rented locally, but the motors both belonged to Wade’s dad, Mr. Wade Creekmore Sr. (as fine and kind a man as you could ever know). Also, every fishing rod, tackle box, and bait we had on this trip were the property of Wade Sr., which he had laboriously

and carefully accumulated over a lifetime of fishing—all entrusted to Wade Jr. for us to use and enjoy and return “like we found it.” Oh, that it had gone that way.

Eagle Lake and Chotard are old river lakes, meaning at some point back in time the Mississippi River flowed through them; presently they were Old Mississippi River channels the river left behind. The spring floods usually resulted in Old Man River spilling over into the old channels, bringing millions of gallons of fresh water and untold fish and other aquatic life of every imaginable description into these lakes. Eagle Lake and Chotard are excellent fishing destinations.

Truthfully, we weren’t nearly as focused on fishing for fishing’s sake as we were on fishing for girls, fun, and the freedom to act like we were more grown and more independent than the reality of our lives actually told. We did fish, and we did catch some fish. (Wade was totally focused on fishing, and he and Bruce did quite well in their end of the expedition.)

About mid-morning of our second day fishing, we all hit a spot where no one was catching anything. So, Wade announced he wanted to take a little investigative trip to a local bait shop to find out where we might find more productive fishing holes in Eagle or one of the other old river lakes in the immediate vicinity. Wade said he would go, and we could hang out there and fish from the bank while he was gone. The only thing he cautioned us about was: “Whatever you do, don’t get in the boat while I am gone!”

Why do grown-ups do that? When will they learn that the one thing you don’t do when you are trying to get children to mind is tell them, “Whatever you do, don’t do . . .”? It is a given that is exactly what they are going to do (or at least it was so with me).

I remember the one and only time in my life I ever rode a Shetland pony. I was with my childhood friend C. L. Leonard at his grandparents’ home down at Bunkley on Chuck Prichard Farms. They lived in a big old farmhouse on the west side of Bunkley Road, sitting on a good little hill overlooking the wide expanse of the Prichard Farms as it stretches out toward the western bank of the Homochitto River. It was a great place, with many great stories related to that place and the Prichard family.

When we got there, we wanted to head off across the road, go down on the farm, and hang out, explore, and enjoy an adventure. Grandmother Nettles said, “You boys have a good time. Do whatever

“Whatever You Do, Don’t Get in the Boat!”

you want, but whatever you do, don’t try to ride that Shetland pony!” We didn’t “pass go”; we didn’t do anything but head straight to the Shetland pony pen and figure out a way to get the pony to come by the fence where I could jump off the fence onto the pony’s back and enjoy a pleasurable little pony ride.

It all happened just like that—that is, everything except the pleasurable pony ride. The next thing I consciously knew was when I woke up on the bed at Grandma Nettles’ house. According to reliable eyewitness accounts, the moment I landed on the back of the pony, he launched me back through the wooden fence and onto the hard-scrabble dirt of the farm road leading down into Prichard Farms. That was my first concussion. I think I was about nine or ten years old at the time.

I remember another occasion when C. L. and I were galloping down U.S. Highway 98, and the saddle on my horse slipped and went under the belly of the horse. He wound up dragging me face-first down the highway, my foot caught in the stirrup. That was likely my second concussion. Mrs. Maggie Leonard, C. L.’s mother, treated all my cuts and scrapes with horse liniment that was red and had an unusually strong smell. Best medicine ever made; my face healed up without a scar!

Meanwhile, back at Eagle Lake. Surely Wade had heard of that Shetland pony story. Surely he had been warned by someone that you never, ever tell us boys, especially Hollis, “Whatever you do, don’t . . .” Apparently not, because those were Wade’s parting words. Like the Shetland pony ride, when the dust from Wade’s departing Chrysler was thick enough to hide his back trail, we headed for the boats. Let me rephrase that: I headed for the boats and shamed David into coming with me. But, of course, I didn’t go for the small boat with the small motor. I went for the big boat with the big motor. That was also the boat that had the really good fishing gear in it, the lifetime accumulation of treasured fishing lures and gear that belonged to Mr. Creekmore—that would be Wade Creekmore Sr.!

Of course, I had had a day and a half of intensive self-training on the 1.5 horsepower, one-speed Craftsman motor on my little boat. But I had never laid my hands on the tiller of Wade’s dad’s 20 horsepower Johnson Seahorse. It actually had a shiftable transmission, but for some reason the last person who had run it killed it with the transmission in “go.” Not only was it in “go,” the throttle on the handle was stopped

in the wide-open position. To top all that, the tiller was turned full lock to the left. Even a casual glance from someone who knew what they were doing would have revealed this setup for disaster, but it went over my head without notice. So, with David sitting in the front seat and me in the back, both with cigarettes in our mouths (the same ones we had been hiding from Wade), we prepared for a fishing venture previously unknown to us.

I was standing up in the rear of the boat, facing the motor. I pulled on the crank rope, but nothing happened. I pulled again. The same result. The third time I pulled, the motor coughed, caught, and took off wide open and in a full hard right turn. It immediately threw me out the rear of the boat, right over the top of the Johnson Seahorse running at full throttle. The look on David's face was one of complete amazement mixed together with a good dose of fear. The front end where David sat was getting higher and higher, and the rear end, the motor end, was getting lower and lower, and with each circle of the boat it got deeper, and water started to pour into the boat. Soon David was thrown from the front. It was just a moment before the rear began to fill with water and sink.

Right out into Eagle Lake went Mr. Creekmore's cherished fishing equipment, boxes open and sinking (this was long before floating tackle boxes), along with everything else in the boat, and then suddenly, after trying and barely missing us several times with the propeller, the boat went underwater! At that exact moment, Wade arrived back at the landing to survey the results of his hastily discarded admonition!

Many, many years later, as a young lawyer, I took Wade fishing, but I can say that Wade never took me fishing again. He did take me frog gigging and nighttime bow fishing and duck hunting, but those events are for another chapter or perhaps a later account altogether.

I seem to make light of these events. I have laughed with Wade about these stories, but I also have true and deep shame. I wasn't raised to disrespect people or their property in that way. I have the clear sense that all of these events were a form of early alcoholism, or in the words of my cousin, I was "drinking not preaching." One of the things normal people don't understand about alcoholism is that it involves abuse of alcohol, or other substances, but that is not the foundation of the disease. The disease of alcoholism just acts itself out through the channel of alcohol, or other substances, but the reality is that alcoholism is a form of "self will run riot"; it is a disease of "more"

“Whatever You Do, Don’t Get in the Boat!”

of whatever. It is a disease of “please find something to fix what is missing in my life”—but the truth is, there is no alcohol, no sexual experience, nor any other substance or circumstance or acquisition or high to really fix the alcoholic. Nor does abstinence alone solve or even address the problem. I am way ahead of myself here, but the truth is that doing exactly what Wade said “don’t do” is a drink on the way to the pit of alcoholism.

It is not having more that makes my life richer; it is treasuring and enjoying what I do have that makes life grand. Trust the limitations in life; they are there for a reason. Lord, give me today my daily bread.

CHAPTER 17

BOUNTIFUL HARVEST ON THE RIVERBANK

“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!”

—Matthew 7:7-11 (NIV84)

MR. VERNE SULLIVAN AND HIS wife, Mrs. Margie, fed more people than most well-loved local cafés. There was always a hungry crowd around the Sullivan table, mostly kids with their mouths open, like little hungry birds, waiting to have them filled. There were some groceries from Mr. George Gagliardi's Red & White grocery store, Dillon and Smith, or Hollinger's Store; but the main course was usually from the surrounding woods, fields, garden spots, ponds, and streams. The food we consumed wouldn't likely be found on the menu of a favorite local café or a five-star restaurant; however, both would have been jealous of the fare offered there. It was always good and hot and plenty, and Mr. Verne used to love to say to us boys, "Staying at my house is like camping out." I sure wish his "camp" was still open!

One group that I wasn't used to seeing around the kitchen table at the Sullivan household was the game wardens. So it was more than

passing strange and certainly caught my attention when, the day before deer season in the fall of 1967, the game wardens gathered at the Sullivan house. The game wardens weren't the only strange sight that beautiful fall afternoon because the first motor home in Franklin County history, owned by Mr. Dutch Schaeffer, a German Cajun, was parked in front of Mr. Verne and Mrs. Margie's house on the south side of the Meadville-Gloster Road. The converted Continental Trailways bus, populated by Mr. Dutch and his Cajun friends and all his cook pots, had arrived the day before at the Sullivans to be ready for the start of deer season. We had never seen anything like his bus nor had we ever seen or heard anyone with a German-flavored Cajun accent. And we sure had never seen the game wardens gathered up at the Sullivan's camp to exchange pleasantries. We were more used to them trying hard to interrupt the free flow of food from the fields to the Sullivan kitchen counter. This is how it all unfolded on that fall evening in 1967.

The bus and all its inhabitants were just settling into their cooking and storytelling when Game Wardens Denton Ducker, Bickam Ball, and Alcus Huff stopped by for a visit. I don't know, but I suspect word of the Cajun motor home had gotten around, and our game wardens just wanted to "check these old boys out." Whatever the reason, when I got to the Sullivan house late that afternoon, there they all were, and I was sure surprised to see them and to see them and Mr. Verne talking friendly like—seemed to be something new under the sun.

I have to explain that the conflict between Mr. Verne's way and the law was pretty much a never-ending battle. The highlight of Mr. Verne's conflict with game wardens came in a classic courtroom showdown when the game wardens had charged his boys with violating the hunter orange laws (requiring hunters to wear bright orange clothing while in the field). The legal argument Mr. Verne put forth (before the Honorable Edwin Benoist, circuit judge when the case was appealed from Justice to Circuit Court) was that the boys had hunter orange on when they were hunting but took it off when the hunt was over and they were on their way home. He won his case against the state's lawyers with this question and argument pointed to Judge Benoist, who was not prepared for the courtroom charm of Mr. Verne Sullivan:

He looked at Judge Benoist (who he knew was from Natchez and was an outdoorsman himself) and asked, "Your Honor (which,

coming out of his mouth, would phonetically be spelled "Yo Hoonah-hhh!), you go over to Louisiana and fish, I imagine?"

"Yes, Mr. Sullivan, I fish for brim and white perch at Old River in Concordia Parish, Louisiana."

Mr. Verne, setting the trap, observed, "Judge, I am sure you always wear a life vest when you are fishing, don't you?"

Judge Benoist: "Yes, Mr. Sullivan, I always wear a life preserver in the boat."

The case is now about to be won.

Mr. Verne: "Judge, do you wear your life preserver when you are driving back to Mississippi?"

Case dismissed. Verne Sullivan 1, Game Wardens 0.

Meanwhile, back at the bus, when you went in the door, your senses were assaulted with the smell of good old Cajun shrimp gumbo and sour mash bourbon and the unmistakable melody of Cajun accents, the sharper-sounding German-Cajun accents, and "country boy" accents. There were tall tales unfolding all around the cabin of that homemade motor home as an abundance of drinks were being served. The suspicions of the game wardens—who came to see if the well-equipped hunters from across the state line to the west and south were properly licensed—were slowly washing away, and the mood of these peace officers was lightening up considerably. Nothing like a cool drink and some hot gumbo to make folks get along.

"Flies on the wall," that's what Bill Sullivan and I were. We were just eating this up, all ears with our mouths hanging open at this new view of the whole scene in general, and of the game wardens in particular. On the day of these amazing events, I was thirteen years old, driving my daddy's half cab International Scout four-wheel-drive jeep, and for me to be with this bunch was like heaven on earth as far as I could see. As they say, "It definitely don't get no better than this."

For pure enjoyment to our little ears, Mr. Verne was enough, even if there hadn't been another soul up in that bus! Entertained is not at all adequate to describe how Mr. Verne Sullivan left you; he had stories aplenty, but he was just one of those unique persons who didn't really need to tell you a funny story; he was just himself and that was prime-time entertainment and then some. If he were living today and someone wanted to plan a reality television show around him, the *Duck Dynasty* and *Swamp People* shows couldn't find a channel to even take them; Verne Sullivan was live reality at its best! He was as real

as they come, and he could keep you fully entertained taking out the trash, lighting a cigarette, or doing any other normal activity. Routine with him became a reality comedy show without equal. He didn't even have to speak; he could tell a story with his eyes and body language that was funnier and more interesting than most people using a whole basketful of words. Mr. Verne didn't have to open his mouth to fully engage your laugh trigger. When he did start talking, if you had a funny bone anywhere in your body, you could bet he would hit it.

I am losing the point of my story, but just "a touch of Mr. Verne" here: You could ask, "When does deer season open?" and he would reply, "Deer season? There ain't but two seasons on this place: salt and pepper. We hunt and fish all the time because we have to feed all these chaps." Now, clearly, I can tell you the game wardens didn't agree with his philosophy, and he battled them regularly—in the woods and in the courts. Truth be known, he won more than he lost. But tonight, all scores were settled and all family business was going to be taken care of, and Mr. Verne had a plan to see that the game wardens would be well fed.

Bill and I were listening and watching (amazed because we had never seen the game wardens—a really good group of good men, by the way—so up close and with no battle going on) as this most unique scene unfolded right in front of us. You couldn't have pulled us out of there with stories of every sweet girl in our class waiting outside for us. Not even the report of a big buck crossing the pipeline would have brought us out of that place. We were all in with this show! Bill was Mr. Verne's number-three son and my number-one friend.

The only thing that could get us out of there was Mr. Verne himself. He called me and Bill outside for a conference, the kind where he did the talking and we did the listening. He said, "You boys [emphasis on *boys*] go and get some fresh deer meat so I can feed these game wardens some fried backstrap! The facts that the season didn't open until the next day, it was already night (and we all know deer season is never open at night), and the game wardens were ten feet away were never mentioned and were factors of absolutely no concern to the speaker. Mr. Verne always kept first things first; he was determined to put on a show for the wardens and the "coooon asses" (coming out of his mouth, that phrase was about four syllables or more).

Mr. Verne knew that if anybody, anywhere, could go get a deer and bring it back in a hurry, it was Bill. So Mr. Verne laid out the plan

like this: "You boys go in Hollis's jeep, and, Bill, you get some meat and get on back up here and don't be long. These game wardens are hungry."

Verne Sullivan went back to his favorite activity—entertaining company with simple tales of life on the river, with stories of quail shot, catfish caught, and brown whiskey consumed. Meanwhile, Bill and I went to work on this new job of feeding game wardens. We eased out of the driveway, down the hill toward the Homochitto River bridge (known to all as "Sullivan's Bridge"), turned onto Sullivan property, and took an old field road that followed right along the bank of the Homochitto River in a southwesterly direction. Bill got in the back of the jeep with a rifle and a headlight to spot a deer.

We hadn't been gone five minutes when I heard "tap, tap, tap," the subtle but clear metallic sound of Bill signaling me to ease to a stop. We stopped alongside a high clay bluff overlooking the Homochitto. In the daytime, the view from these high bluffs was compelling—a long view downstream to the mouth of Middle Fork Creek, which is officially named the "Middle Fork of the Homochitto River." The area where we stopped was known to all of us as "Verne's Office."

Bill's spotlight was illuminating an area off to our right, a briar thicket around a thick stand of thorn-covered black locust saplings. Knowing what we were there for didn't keep me from jumping when I heard the sharp thwack of the Winchester Model 94 lever-action rifle (which, honestly, my daddy didn't know I had borrowed). My heart was pounding, and I whispered, "You get him, Bill?" This was an insulting question, as Bill generally got what he shot at. To my surprise he whispered back, "I don't know." There was a brief but deep silence, which was suddenly and violently and completely unexpectedly shattered by another thwack as a second shot rang out. Bill said, no longer whispering, "I got him that time." Well, as it turned out, "him" wasn't a him; it was a "her." And "it" wasn't an it; it was a "them." Bill killed two does. You need to understand in those days there was no such thing as "doe season"; killing a doe was almost a hanging offense, and doing it at night, well . . . ! We scooped them up, put them in the back of the jeep, and were back at the house in less than thirty minutes.

Within an hour of the hastily arranged conference called by Mr. Verne, the first deer meat was coming out of a skillet of boiling Crisco

lard. We put it on the plates of the game wardens, who gladly enjoyed the bounty of the evening—although they certainly didn't know its source. Or did they? Regardless of where that meat came from, it was eaten up like the delicacy that it is, without equal. If you've never had fried deer meat, especially backstrap, from a freshly killed deer, you just haven't lived, my friend.

As I was putting this memory down on paper, I thought of another conference when a father sent a son out to get some wild game. Isaac sent Esau out to kill some wild game to come back and have a feast. Jacob, with the help of his mother, intervened and provided a quicker meal in order to deceive Isaac and steal Esau's blessing.¹² I guess that without realizing the parallel, we boys certainly were seeking Mr. Verne's blessing and we definitely got it that night. I don't think he even imagined that kind of quick delivery on his order. That was a different era of "fast food"!

The events of that memorable fall night at the Sullivan place took place more than fifty years ago, and sadly every single person involved, other than me, has now passed on. I am pretty sure the statute of limitation has run on these events, but if not, it's still all right because the game wardens ate up all the evidence. The "corpus delicti" was coated with Heinz ketchup and washed down with bourbon whiskey.

Growing up in rural southwest Mississippi and regularly visiting the Sullivan household on the banks of the Homochitto River made for many great times and great memories. The night the game wardens ate the evidence is an especially fond and treasured memory to me.

¹⁹ And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:19, niv84)

Fond memories notwithstanding, excitement found in bending the rules, in spotlighting deer right under the noses of the game wardens, was clearly a part of doing my own thing. Those kinds of decisions and actions ultimately contributed to many sad and tragic results in years to come. We were just having fun, boys being boys, but a picture was emerging, a picture of a rising river that was headed for flood stage. At the time, it was just good old country boy fun, but at its core it was, at least for me, the early stages of a pattern of reckless behavior that wasn't good then and did not bode well for the years that would follow. Without taking anything away from that

¹² The full story is found in Genesis 27.

fun time, there is still a truth that must be confronted here: When we set the stage by defying the authorities (all authority is from God), we are pursuing a pattern that leads to a flood and the consequential damage that always comes with flooding! I was “drinking” rather than “preaching.”

A sense that you are different, that you have the right to live life on a different plane than others, is classic addictive thinking. All authority is from God, and just like our parents warning about playing in the street, its purpose is our own good and God’s glory.

God’s glory is our first and prime responsibility.

CHAPTER 18

SPRING BREAK

(COUNTRY STYLE IN THE '60S IN THE SOUTH)

*"There is a time for everything, and a season
for every activity under heaven."*

—Ecclesiastes 3:1 (NIV84)

THREE BOYS, A VOLKSWAGEN, a boat and trailer, an island in the Mississippi River, and a holiday week. Sounds pretty tame and somewhat natural. Well, the boys were Royce Crecink, Howard Herring, and me. The oldest was about fourteen, the trailer was hooked to the Volkswagen without the benefit of a hitch, there was a gallon of wine involved, and the hunting camp on the island belonged to someone else. Starting to sound a little flaky? Plug in that the boat is a twelve-foot jon boat with a questionable motor, the river to cross is the Mississippi, and it's at high-flood stage—this was going to be one of those trips.

Howard's daddy, Mr. Charles H. "Bug" Herring, was a member of Diamond Point Hunting Club, which was our destination. It was where we planned to stay while vacationing on Davis Island in the Mississippi River, on the Louisiana side across from Vicksburg, just north of Tallulah, Louisiana. Howard's plan was for us to go up during Spring Break and stay the week.

It was 1966 as I recall. Howard and Royce were fourteen, and I was closing in on birthday number thirteen. Needless to say, none of us had a driver's license or anything that even resembled one. But we

were used to that little anomaly; all three of us drove regularly all over our rural corner of the state. Of course, we weren't going to be in our little corner of the state or even in our state, but no reason to let this technicality keep us from an adventure! Undaunted, we forged ahead.

Howard said the camp would be empty, and we would have the whole island to ourselves. (He had no idea just how right that would turn out to be). "Okay, Howard, sounds good. How do we get there?" we asked. He told us his plan was to chain (we didn't have a trailer hitch) a small boat trailer to the rear bumper of the VW Bug, loaded with a twelve-foot jon boat with a 10 horsepower Johnson Seahorse outboard motor down in the boat to be put on when we got there. The plan was to cross the Mississippi at Natchez, drive up through the broad flat plain of the Louisiana Delta to historic Tallulah, Louisiana, where we would head out to the bank of the Old River, which had to be crossed to get to Diamond Point.

Oh, yeah, there was also the small problem of convincing our parents to let us go. I don't know what that was like for those two, but I had to put on an absolute Oscar performance to get my mother to let me go. Daddy was busy, and he pretty much left those kinds of decisions up to my mother. She knew better, but she let me go anyway. I don't know if it was the relief of getting me out of her hair for a few days, or more likely it was that I wore her completely down on the subject. I still remember my excitement when she capitulated. I was going on the adventure of a lifetime. And so, when we left Howard's house, I felt like this was an adventure to rival the boating trip taken in the *Niña*, the *Pinta*, and the *Santa María*. I felt much like I imagined Christopher Columbus must have felt when Queen Isabella said he could go in search of the New World. I was excited!

We were armed with cigarettes (the main food we took with us), Howard's .30-caliber M1 Carbine, a little real food, our clothes, and our jon boat and small outboard motor, and we were off for a week. Admittedly, this was a little shorter than Chris' trip, but then he didn't have Howard and Royce!

I was feeling pretty good about the trip until we got to Vidalia, Louisiana. Howard and Royce were plotting how to buy a big bottle of wine and some beer for the trip. Now, at that time I didn't care anything for alcohol; in fact, I was dead set against it. When they got a bottle of wine and some beer from Charley's Minute Stop in Vidalia, I

Spring Break

thought we were surely going to die right then or at least go to prison for the rest of our lives. Royce and Howard were in the front seat having the time of their lives, and I was in the back worrying enough for all three of us. I should have known then, as I know now, "This is the day the Lord has made . . . I will relax and enjoy it"—or at least that's Rosebud's version of it. Rosebud is a new friend I met recently while visiting a local nursing home facility who interrupted me and said, "This is the day the Lord has made, I will relax and enjoy it" (instead of "we will rejoice and be glad in it" [Psalm 118:24, NKJV]). What wisdom those old eyes held and foretold!

Kids have a routine they follow in the spring, but so does the Mississippi River. The kids always do Spring Break in the spring. The river was doing what it always does in the spring—flood! Spring 1966 didn't vary from the usual pattern: snow runoff from the north resulted in high flooding in the lower Mississippi River Valley. When the Mississippi is not at flood stage, access to Davis Island is across the still and calm waters of the Old River channel. When the Mississippi is at or above flood stage, as it was in spring 1966, the main river takes over and flows directly into and through the Old River channel.

The normally calm Old River changes drastically when the Mississippi gets into it; the normal landscape of the bank and the usual landmarks are gone. We faced a vastly different Old River, and this made the whole prospect of getting to Diamond Point different and dangerously challenging. Further complicating our efforts, it was dark when we arrived and we had no flashlight of any kind.

When you are a teenager, the very present and real dangers of a flooding Mississippi don't sink in, not even when it's dark and you have no flashlight. In spite of the river going from a cub to a full-grown bear, we were completely undaunted and launched our little jon boat and small outboard motor into the flood waters with no landmarks, no flashlight, and no sense!

Boldness notwithstanding, the darkness, the absence of any flashlight, and the lack of landmarks left us searching for a needle in a haystack. Our circumstances were reminiscent of what my old friend Judge Donald B. Patterson used to note about a particular legal concept that he observed was akin to "a blind man in a dark room looking for a black hat that isn't there." The landmark Howard had in mind had been washed away by spring floods, and even if it had

still existed, it would have been underwater, way underwater. Even if it hadn't been gone or been underwater, it still would have been invisible to us because we had nothing to cut the pitch black of night. We plunged ahead with no more thought than anything else we had undertaken—that is to say, we moved foolishly.

Howard was the only one of us who had ever been to Davis Island. He had not considered how totally different the river would look and act during spring floods. What Howard was used to seeing in the fall just didn't exist in the flooded landscape. The landing Howard knew and was looking for no longer existed, and with no light or clue as to a back-up plan, we were destined to spend the night looking for that "black hat that wasn't there."

Deep into the night, we finally found a spot to stop the boat. We got out of the boat into the flooded woods and literally felt our way through the maze of trees and brush as we waded through the flood-waters to find an opening and dry ground. Once we found the open ground (the huge open field in which Diamond Point is located), there still remained a long, dark, cold, wet walk to the camp. We reached the camp cold, wet, and tired (and, in my case, feverish—having left home with an already sore throat). My fever and all that went with it was about to really jump on me, but at the moment we were just really glad to be there and ready to continue our adventure.

Diamond Point camp was a large, rambling, wood-and-tin structure with bunk areas, a kitchen, and a large dining area with picnic-type tables scattered around. In addition to the main camp building, there was a separate skinning and open-air meat storage building and a lean-to where the camp kept a few old World War II Willys Jeeps with canvas tops.

Our heads didn't touch the cots good before it was daylight and we were up and moving. In our self-centered "the world is here to suit us" attitude, we never thought "whose" or "how" about the jeeps—or anything else for that matter—only what we needed and how to best meet those needs: let the chips fall where they may. We immediately started work on getting one of the jeeps running to begin our safari. When we got one of the jeeps cranked, Howard said, "Let's go ahead and get some meat (meaning: kill a deer to keep us fed while we were on the island)."

Howard was driving, Royce was riding shotgun, and I was in the back seat of the jeep (age has privilege, especially in the pecking order

Spring Break

of front seats for boys). The field the camp was located in was the largest wide open space I had ever seen; it seemed to me that it was a mile or more across. We were used to deer feeding primarily at night, but on this secluded island with its huge open savannah, the deer were feeding twenty-four hours a day. We saw many deer feeding that morning in herds all around the large open field.

With our jeep cranked, we took off for the nearest group of deer. Howard braked to a slow roll, jumped up in a standing position, and made a really amazing shot (which we have never been allowed to forget) on a running deer at a distance of close to two hundred yards. So, with a deer down, "meat in the box," the world at our feet, and plenty of cigarettes and matches, we were set up for the adventure of all adventures to continue. What a week we had planned—or so it seemed in our minds. As I look back on it, we were totally without a plan, without much of anything, but that is planning as viewed by a teenager.

We skinned and cleaned the deer and hung him in the skinning shed. The shed was a screened enclosure that probably worked well in the winter, but it was not a great place to preserve meat in the seventy-plus degree weather of springtime in the Louisiana Delta. Spoiled meat wasn't an immediate problem, but with five days ahead of us to live off that meat with no refrigeration, it would become a problem soon enough.

The remaining deer carcass was hung, with enough meat cut off to feed us a good meal immediately. We cooked up the deer meat, and with our stomachs full, we were now ready to explore. It still was just early afternoon, with a lot of day left.

It soon became apparent that there were some necessities we were without. In order to be really prepared for the rest of the week, someone was going to have to make a run into town. I also was hoping for something to fight my growing fever. It was decided (meaning Howard said it) that Howard would stay and "take care of things at camp," and Royce and I would make the trip back to the tree where we left the boat tied, back up the Mississippi River, into town, and back again. This seemed like no big deal now that we knew where we were going, and it would all be in the daylight. Right? All was well.

Royce and I set out on our supply-replenishing trip into Tallulah. We made it back to our boat along the river fine. We made it back up the river to the car with no problems. Our trip into Tallulah was

pretty uneventful. But there was one problem. When we got back to the boat for the return trip, it was starting to get dark. We thought of just staying there at the boat landing until daylight but decided we shouldn't leave Howard on the island alone all night, so off we went. It seemed as if night fell about the time we pulled the crank rope on the Johnson Seahorse and it coughed to life, and so once again we were trying to find our way in the dark. But we thought surely we wouldn't have any problem finding it this time; after all, we'd found it once before. We didn't take into account several things: we had one less set of eyes, we had never been here before, we still had no flashlight, and, most importantly, we didn't realize the impact of the quickly rising river and how it constantly changed the scenery by covering more and more dry ground with backwaters of the Mighty Mississippi River.

We were in a boat in the Mississippi, we had no light, and we didn't know where we were going or what to do. We were lost. Now, finally, we were scared! We wanted to try to go back to the car, but we weren't sure of that, and we didn't feel like we could leave Howard alone either.

We forged ahead with our search for the landing; eventually, we found a place to land that looked right, and we took it. (The place we went ashore was not the place we needed to be.) Again, it was cold, dark, and lonely. Royce and I wandered through the swamp for a bit, meaning we waded through the dark water, in the dark night, surrounded by huge old-growth cypress and sweet gums and willow trees and thickets of new-growth willow. We were wading in our street clothes, and there were stump holes you could lose a jeep in. There were places where you couldn't get through at all. We finally gave up and decided to camp in the swamp, but we were completely surrounded by water, and the thought of standing in the water all night was not appealing. We found a huge, hollowed-out cypress stump, and we climbed inside of it and built a fire.

"We are going to die here!" Royce proclaimed. "We'll never get out of here alive!" We began speaking of how this is where we were going to die. We talked of how long it would be, if ever, before they found our remains. We thought of how that probably wouldn't present a problem, since a bear or an alligator or a "wampus cat" would likely kill us and eat us before daylight anyway. My fever was full blast by now, and I was one miserable little boy. Scared too!

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Sometime way in the night, we heard some gunshots. We thought of what that might be and decided it was someone out to kill us and to try to do it before the critters got to us. But it wasn't either of those; it was Howard. The one thing we hadn't thought about was how he was likely more scared than us because at least there was an "us" with us, but with him there was just him.

Howard was alone on the island; he had no way to get back to civilization because we took the boat with us. He was wading through the swamp, firing a shotgun, praying for someone to hear him. I don't know if we were more excited to see him or him us. Oh, and by the way, while we were gone, Howard had gained access to another locker back at camp and gotten a shotgun, plenty of shells, and a flashlight. We were back in business; he knew the way out of the swamp and back to the camp. We made it back in one piece. We were safely home at Diamond Point camp.

We had a new problem. The butane tank had run out. With no electricity on the island, the butane was the only source for lights and cooking except for wood. Never fear, Howard had a plan for the lights and, to some extent for my sake, some heat. We could, according to him, simply pour gasoline into an empty pint (bean) can, light the top of it, and let it sit and burn and thus function as our light. It was still cool at night, even though hot in the daytime—especially when you were feverish.

Believe it or not, as crazy as it sounded, the gasoline light plan seemed to be working okay. I was even trying to forget about the fever and the pain that wouldn't let me forget every time I swallowed. So, we were enjoying the new lights, Howard was cooking on the wood stove, and Royce and I were hanging out at one of the tables. He was on one side, I was on the other side, and the light was on the table in between us.

Royce found some Diamond Point Hunting Club—posted "No Trespassing" signs made of stiff cardboard and discovered that these could be sailed across the room like little flying saucers. (They were actually like Frisbees, but this was before the Frisbee had been invented or, if invented, hadn't invaded our part of the world that I recall.) Royce would sail the posters through the flames (his aim was generally pretty good), and I was there on the other side to catch them. It worked great until one poster hit the can and caused it to tip over—on me! As the gasoline poured out, it caught up and all landed on

me, and I was suddenly the human torch. What is the recommended posture for someone on fire? Run like hell! No, but that is what I did. There was a fire extinguisher, and by the time we got me put out, the whole kitchen was on fire. While they eventually got the fire out, it wasn't before there was more than a little damage to the kitchen and dining room.

I would say that I must have been blessed of the Lord for reasons far beyond my entitlement (which was none). I only had blisters and a "haircut." As I recall, it was the next day that we decided it might be time for us to "get out of Dodge" because the scene at deer camp was not pretty. We thought if someone did happen to come up to the camp, we would be in way more trouble than we had created on our own and that was considerable. They would probably feed us to the alligators and the "wampus cats" and rightfully so!

We hightailed it back to the boat, back to the landing, back to the Volkswagen, back on to the boat trailer and headed back home to Mississippi. I think I am leaving a few days out because I remember there was one day when Howard raided a member's locker, who happened to be a medical doctor, and recovered syringes and medicine that Howard reported was "just what the doctor ordered" for tonsillitis and fever. I remember spending most of that day running to stay away from Dr. Kildaire, who wanted to heal me.

With all that said, it was a high adventure that yielded a lifetime of stories. Howard's story is always about "the shot" that he still thinks was heard around the world when he killed the running deer at about two hundred yards (the distance has gotten much farther through the years) with the open sights on an M1 Carbine. I almost didn't live through it, but I wouldn't take anything for the trip.

I have never been back to Diamond Point—and I certainly didn't expect to be invited back—but it's a place that lives on in my memory quite vividly and with great fondness in spite of and maybe because of the calamities we survived there.

I have found it to be mostly fun to remember many of these events. The Spring Break trip to Diamond Point certainly was a fun time, but it has caused me to give considerable time and thought to the mental process in all of this. How does a person wind up in such a mess and always be the one to "take it on the chin" in these activities? I don't have a complete answer, but I do have thoughts formulating. When I combine these events with the tragedies that occurred later in my life,

Spring Break

I am led to the inescapable conclusion that there is more at work here than just chance. The end result is that when I am pursuing life my way, I must accept responsibility for the tragedies that follow those choices. God has a will and a way; when I depart from it, I can always expect to suffer the harvest of my own crop of pain.

Floods in rivers are there for a purpose, and the best way to approach a flooding river is to carefully watch it from a distance. Life has its floods also; trying to play with the floods of life will almost always bring about disastrous results.

CHAPTER 19

FLOOD OF A LIFETIME

“And rain fell on the earth forty days and forty nights.”

—Genesis 7:12 (NIV)

SEVERAL YEARS OF HEAVY SNOW in the North, an early snowmelt in the upper Mississippi Valley, and a record-setting late winter and early spring rainfall led to one of the worst floods ever on the lower Mississippi River. In the spring of 1973, the flooding on the Mississippi and the heavy spring rainfall contributed to another record flood on the Homochitto River, a flood of epic proportions.

It was Spring Break, and my old roommate John Smith and I decided, flood notwithstanding, to float the Homochitto River. The Homochitto has the capacity to lull one into a false sense of security because 90 percent of the time it is a shallow, slow, lazy river. It is a mistake to think of the Homochitto in that way; in the right or, rather, the wrong circumstances, the mistake can easily become a fatal one.

Neither of us owned a boat, so we borrowed a very unique water-craft of sorts, a homemade “boat” from a local farm pond. This vessel was created by someone taking two 1949 Ford truck hoods and welding them together to create quite a strange boat. The Ford truck-hoods boat may have been fine for pond work, but it lacked one crucial component for safe and reliable river travel: there was no keel. If you are not a boat person, the keel is the midpoint on the bottom of a boat that helps to stabilize the boat and give it direction (as opposed to going in circles). The finer points of this vessel’s shortcomings were lost on us, at least

Flood of a Lifetime

until it was much too late to do anything about it. We were young, it was spring, and nothing else mattered, right? The lack of safety considerations represented a continuation of a lifelong pattern for me.

John loved the outdoors and spent a significant part of his far-too-short life working in the outdoors, documenting wildflowers, and photographing all aspects of nature. I suppose his desire on this trip was to see what the rain-swollen Homochitto held in store; I was just looking for the thrill of taking on the Homochitto at record flood stage. Regardless of our motives, we decided to float the river, and we weren't put off by little things like no boat, no proper equipment, or any other hindrance that presented itself.

It was a bright sunny day, but cool with a strong west-northwest wind blowing. The "boat," as already noted, was ill conceived, but our equipping was just as poor, if not more so. As it turns out, the ill-conceived boat was the highlight of our preparation because beyond it we had one paddle, one board about the length of a paddle, and a Remington .22 automatic, for snakes. We had no life jackets, no flotation cushions, no rope, no emergency provisions, and no clue as to what we were about to encounter. We were both dressed in jeans, boots, and I think John had on a light jacket.

Our put-in spot was adjoining property owned by my family immediately south of the U.S. Highway 98 bridge over the Homochitto. On this particular day the Homochitto was quite unladylike as she was "bank to bank" as they say and moving quite swiftly. With the river that high and swift, when we pushed off, we were all in; there was no turning back (although we could have turned aside to the bank).

The Homochitto was at a flood stage I had seldom if ever seen before. It not only covered the entire huge sandbar on the north bank of the river by the 98 bridge, but it had flooded out into the public road we call River Road. Out in the river channel, there were logs and whole trees and what looked like islands of "Indian soap" (a sort of "foam") floating down the river in the muddy brown waters of the Homochitto that day.

When we got well out into the river, two things were immediately and dangerously obvious: John and I had seriously misjudged the power and ferocity of the swollen Homochitto, and trying to steer a boat without a keel was futile. The Ford boat was continually spinning in complete circles while traveling swiftly downstream. There was no steering this ill-conceived boat, and our lack of planning was turning more disastrous by the moment.

All of these dangers went effectively unnoticed due to our optimism and youthful exuberance. I think, in retrospect, John was feeling the danger but sort of talking and laughing it off in classic John Smith fashion. In reality, we didn't have time for fear to get a grip on us because we were moving downstream very rapidly. Besides all that, even if we wanted out, the craziness of our boat and the complete inability to effectively direct it left us with no effective way to extricate ourselves anyway. We were completely at the mercy of the river and divine providence.

That's the end of the "good news." Before we made it around the first curve, John lost his grip on the only real paddle we had, leaving me with a one-inch by four-inch board about six feet long as the sum total of our "marine" equipment to paddle our tin lizzie of a boat. In spite of all that, I can still hear our somewhat nervous but dismissive laughter as we plunged into the venture ahead on the now very powerful and loud Homochitto River. I think it was only minutes later that, at a deep level in our hearts, we were starting to realize—although not admitting it—that we had messed up!

We were progressing downriver at speeds I had never experienced in all my years of floating the river in tubes, canoes, and flatboats. Very shortly we were at the McGehee-Leonard property line, and I noticed Mr. Clifton Leonard standing on the left-hand riverbank quietly watching us quickly slide by. He had only a moment to speak, and he said, "What are you doing? You boys better get out of that river!" I decided to try to follow his suggestion and attempted to use my long board to reach out and snag a tree protruding from the bank. Not appreciating the force of the current, I couldn't dislodge our last paddle before the river dragged us downstream. Now with no paddle and no hope for even moderately directing our ill-fated vessel, we were totally at the mercy of the current, and it didn't appear there was any mercy in store for us.

Amazingly, in the way only youngsters (John was almost twenty-one, and I was just past nineteen) can do, we still weren't overly concerned about the dire gravity of our circumstances. In fact, I remember us laughing quite a bit at the loss of our last paddle. It may be that the laughing was, at least in part, an effort to cover underlying nerves. We were talking of the snakes we expected to shoot with our twenty-two rifle, which was actually not ours but my dad's rifle. Since he was at his office, I hadn't actually asked him about taking his rifle on our adventure; besides, I pretty much knew his answer would be "No!"

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Surprisingly, we weren't under the influence of alcohol. I guess we were probably suffering from an overdose of youthful male testosterone that doesn't have enough judgment to see the need for limits. We were quickly approaching the pipeline, a place where Texas Eastern-owned underground natural gas pipeline crosses the Homochitto. I was sort of hoping that given the way in which the current moved when close to the pipeline, we might be able to hand-paddle our way close enough to the bank to grab something solid to pull us to the shore. I was hoping we could get out at the pipeline and walk to the road and catch a ride to the truck.

I was partly right. We did get out of the boat at the pipeline; we just weren't on the bank when we did it. There was a downriver-leaning snag jutting up out of the swirling muddy water as we continued our spinning ways, and the snag caught the truck-hoods boat midship. Without even the slightest warning, we were in cold, swift water well over our heads, and the boat was sucked under and away, never to be seen again. The air may have been reasonably warm, but the water was not. It felt like ice water!

Oh, the other thing I neglected to mention that John was essentially a non-swimmer; on his best day he had a very weak and questionable dog paddle. Where we went into the river, the water was probably about eight feet deep. The depth was a problem, but the deadly factor was the swiftness of the water. Only by the grace of God, I was able to get to John very quickly, before he got in trouble, and I just bear-hugged him from behind and let the current carry us. I knew, or rather I hoped, that the flow of the river and the profile of the sandbar at that point would work us toward the left-hand bank on the south side of the river. We managed, again by the grace of God, to hold on until we came to a spot where our feet touched, and we were able to get out to the woods and the river's edge.

Understandably, we were both scared at this point. John was sort of out of control, scared because he had come so close to drowning. I had an out-of-control feeling, too, but mine was much different from John's. My fear didn't have anything to do with what you might think; my overwhelming thought was, "Oh crap! Daddy's rifle is in the river!" I was much more afraid of my daddy than the Homochitto. I sent John through the woods downriver to get our take-out vehicle and come back to pick me up. I told him I had to go back to try to get the rifle. John said, "Man, you're crazy! You will never find that rifle." I knew he

was totally right, but I also knew how deathly afraid I was of telling my daddy I lost had his rifle that I wasn't even supposed to have in the first place. Fear is a powerful motivator. No doubt, if my dad were there, he would have wisely told me to forget about the rifle, but he wasn't, and I couldn't see that point. What I could see was the confrontation that would of necessity occur when the rifle was discovered to be gone; the years had not dimmed my memory of a previous time when I took one of his guns without permission and the result was not pretty.

I took off my waterlogged boots, stripped down to my underwear, grabbed my stuff, and started up the riverbank at a run. I don't know if you have ever ventured along the wooded edge of the Homochitto, but there are trophy briar patches and thornbushes. I think my bare feet and legs found most of them. I just had to ignore the briars and the thorns and get on the upriver side of that snag that had dumped us in order to be able to swim out to and get a hold on the snag. I felt like the odds were extremely long that I could even get to the snag, much less find the rifle, but fear said, "Go," so I had to try.

I went into the river at the upper side of the pipeline and angled across the current to fight my way to the snag where our boat had turned over and the rifle went down. The boat was nowhere to be seen; in fact, I never saw that boat again (good riddance, hopefully we saved anyone else from ever making the mistake of getting in the river in that boat again). The current was much too strong for me to go against it, so I just allowed the downstream pull and the upstream angle I had taken to land me at the snag—and it did, barely. I grabbed the snag at the last possible moment, and even though the current tried to take me on downriver, I was able to hold on and pull myself in to the snag

The snag was really a tree in the middle of the river with its base upstream and its top downstream. I knew I couldn't stay there long. I was able to get a firm hold on a limb protruding down from the underside of the tree, so I pushed off the bottom of the snag, forcing myself down in the river. My foot hit bottom; amazingly "bottom" was a slick piece of wood that I knew miraculously was the stock of my daddy's twenty-two rifle, and by some means that I don't understand to this very day, I grabbed it between my feet. Then as the river pushed me downstream, I was eventually able to get my hand on it and held on until I touched bottom at the same approximate location John and I had reached the shallow water previously. Amazingly, I made it out with my daddy's Remington .22 rifle. It looked fine, but it

was completely clogged with sand. But, hey, I had it back, and cleaning it was no problem compared to trying to get it out of the river. It was a true miracle that John and I not only didn't both drown but also were able to find and recover my dad's rifle.

Not drowning that day tells me the following did not apply to me, that there *is* meaning, and my job is to get busy living out God's meaning and plan for my life:

¹ The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem: ² "Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless." ³ What does man gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun? ⁴ Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever. ⁵ The sun rises and the sun sets, and hurries back to where it rises. ⁶ The wind blows to the south and turns to the north; round and round it goes, ever returning on its course. ⁷ All streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full. To the place the streams come from, there they return again. ⁸ All things are wearisome, more than one can say. The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear its fill of hearing. ⁹ What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun. ¹⁰ Is there anything of which one can say, "Look! This is something new"? It was here already, long ago; it was here before our time. (Ecclesiastes 1:1-10, NIV84)

The events of that day in the river with John speak mainly to the fact that God had something else for us to do. There was no apparent reason for us to have made it out of there at all; of course, as has been the case so many times in my life, there was no reason for me to have been there in the first place. There is no place where life is beyond hope, and there is no place in my life or in your life that we reach "a bridge too far." God is able—not just able, but ready and willing. When I look back on that day, as well as many others, I am inclined to say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening—finally!"

You are not here by chance. God has a purpose for your life and the events of your life. Look up and fix your eyes on Him.

CHAPTER 20

COMING OF AGE

“Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.”

—Proverbs 22:6 (NKJV)

“SURELY THERE MUST BE SOME place I fit in, some place that needs me.” Fitting in, finding my place was the recurring theme throughout my life. Finding that place was especially significant through my high school and college years. Almost any opportunity that presented itself was the channel I followed, attempting to find my place in the world. I attended Franklin High School, Copiah-Lincoln Junior College, and then finally the University of Mississippi, the necessary educational channels on the way to a life’s goal of practicing law with my father. I had bypassed the words God spoke so plainly to me when I was twelve years old: “You are here to serve Me.”

God has a plan for relationships, and He sets boundaries in place that honor Him and are a blessing to both of the people. When I had my first serious “love” (early in my college years), I thought she was the girl of my dreams. I disregarded God’s boundaries to serve my own selfish motives because I felt I deserved to be happy. My selfish motives caused harm to both of us, and the relationship was destroyed. I don’t think it was until writing this book I fully realized the destructive impact of my failures. Tragically, those mistakes, those selfish, destructive moments and circumstances have repeated themselves several times. I have, over the years, attempted to look up and apologize to as many people whose

lives were damaged by the floods in my life. Nevertheless, my continuing “overflow” clearly caused harm that can’t be fixed with an apology. The harm flows from doing things “my way.” Oh that I could undo that which I have done. A bell cannot be unrung, and apologies do not fix or repair pain caused and damage inflicted. God forgives, but there is a lesson I know now but not then: I can choose my path but not my consequences; when I ignore God, there will be consequences, and His forgiveness does not avoid the consequences. They are with us always.

In 1966, God said, “You will serve me,” but my goal was law school, coming back home to Meadville, and working with my father and Jimmy Torrey in their law office. I never seriously thought about pursuing the call God had on me; I was intent on “my way.” Everything else was just a necessary step along that ultimate path. Forgotten was the call of God upon my life, dating back to the Meadville Baptist Revival at age twelve. I had my own agenda, and it ruled above all—a mistake I was to repeat over and over throughout my adult life.

I remember the moment that I thought I had found my place. I was a senior in college, and I had a job as a bartender at the Warehouse Restaurant and Bar in Oxford, Mississippi. During my college days I had waited tables in a sorority house, I had worked construction, I had volunteered a little in a restaurant setting (for my close friends Angelo and Jo-Dale Mistilis), and I had worked in a meat market for the iconic Mr. Johnny Smith through Shop-Rite Grocery, owned by my good friends Jerry and Jamie White of Oxford. Now I was one of the lead bartenders at *the* place to go. I thought I had finally found the place where I fit in. I remember how I used to walk around the Square in Oxford with my friend and fellow bar worker, Chuck Balch. I had a uniform: Faded Glory jeans with the seams turned out, black T-shirt with the rising sun on the front, and Justin western boots. What I had sought all my life was realized, I thought, in that place and time and position. “I have found my place, I fit in, I am somebody.” I say all that to show just how desperate I was to find a place. When you fail to plan God’s way, it may look right and feel right. It may be that for decades things could go well, but in the end there are consequences. I live with those consequences every day.

I can’t look back and think of myself as deserving of it, but I graduated Ole Miss and was accepted into the Ole Miss School of Law. I had to get serious—well, more serious than I had been up to then. I plunged into law school, worked hard my first year, and laid a foundation that I hoped portrayed me as being serious about my career. I

also found a group of friends, and we began to find fields of play that provided what we saw as a counterbalance to the work we had to put in. Like everything else in my life to date, I never learned to keep that fun in the banks. I always found ways to overdo it. The partying in law school was no different, just higher stakes.

I thought I was finally starting to find a real spot in life, a spot that seemed to have my name on it. In law school, I managed to get myself onto the Moot Court Board, was elected vice president of the law school, and became a member of Phi Delta Phi, a good legal fraternity. Karen was a great-looking girlfriend who was focused and moving forward, and I thought at that moment I would take that journey with her. In classic form for me, my ultimate achievement, as I saw it, was to be a member of the Duckheads Intramural Football Champs. I thought, "It really doesn't get any better than this."

My complete lack of understanding of my place and purpose in the world wasn't any better at this point than it had been when I was trying to be a Meadville Cardinal. I was all about doing and being what made me feel good. I had no real sense of having a purpose beyond my immediate feelings—it was "me first, now" in everything. That is to say, I was floating down the river of life at high speed, ill equipped and ill prepared. I was headed for a day of reckoning that would be worse than the awakening John Smith and I had in the Homochitto River in the spring of 1973.

²⁴ "A man's steps are from the LORD; how then can man understand his way?" (Proverbs 20:24)

²¹ "Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the LORD that will stand." (Proverbs 19:21)

The call of God is for us to "be" in relationship with him and then to follow after him. Jesus did, and our job is simply to "be" in him. The restlessness of needing to "do" is a dangerous place for one with an addictive personality. Help us to be still and trust in You, God, for in Christ you have done all that needs to be done. help us to hear and respond to your call to come unto you and you will give us rest.

CHAPTER 21

TWO SHALL BECOME ONE

“For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.”

—Matthew 19:5 (NIV)

IN 1977, MY SENIOR YEAR in law school, my life's goal of being a lawyer and practicing law in Meadville, Mississippi, in the firm of McGehee, McGehee, and Torrey was in sight. My grades weren't at the top, but they weren't at the bottom. As my old friend Bard Selden of Tunica likes to say, “No matter where you are in the law school class, if you get out, they will still call you ‘Counselor’!”

She told me later that she didn't plan or even want to go the party that night, but her friends urged her to go, relax, and loosen up a little. Her words to me much later were: “I came into the kitchen to see if I could help, and a strange man with long blond hair hanging down a broad back covered in a rugby shirt was cutting up meat.” He turned, saying something, mistakenly thinking it was the hostess who had entered the room. “Oh my God, that is the man I am going to marry!” was her unwanted response to seeing him. The “him” was me, and the “her” was Prudence Owens. She was in her final semester of a graduate school program in art that resulted in her achieving a terminal degree, an MFA from Ole Miss.

I was just as smitten as Prudence was. When we left the party that night, headed for the fire tower just outside of town, a young lady who was friends with both of us (even though Prudence and I had never

seen each other before) Deborah Mae "Muck" Williams said, "Spit off the top for me." We got into my silver Mustang, listening to Joni Mitchell's *Court and Spark*, and that's what happened on this weekend before Valentine's Day 1977. On September 17, 1977, the day Ole Miss beat Notre Dame in Jackson, Mississippi, Prudence and I were married in Tunica, Mississippi, and began our thirty-six years together. My dad told me when I was a little boy that finding a good woman was, second only to being rightly related to God, the most important thing I could ever do. I agree, and Prudence did and does qualify as a really good woman.

I proposed to her within six weeks of our meeting. That proposal was made in front of the Lyceum building at Ole Miss. The classic proposal was the initial step into a great life with a really good woman. Immediately after our marriage we moved to Meadville and began life, or at least that's the way I saw it. I didn't realize that the channels I had been constructing for almost twenty-four years were, without some major re-engineering, going to direct the course of our lives—quite often in directions we would rather have avoided.

My parents and my law partner, almost like another parent, Jimmy Torrey, had gone together and completely restored Ms. Kitty Hardy's house just around the corner from the law office in Meadville. In fact, Prudence could look out the back window of our house and see the office. We moved into that home, which was very nice and had graciously been provided to us. A young couple couldn't ask for a better or an easier start. Our friends, our family, the community could not have met us more graciously.

I was not satisfied! I immediately began to make plans to build our own house out in the country on family land given to us. The McGehee family had deeded a little over seven acres to me earlier that year. This was a gift my father had arranged for, giving us a beautiful spot on the corner of our family place that had been in our family for the better part of one hundred years. By the next spring we were engaged in the process of building a log house on our land. This would become the centerpiece of our lives together, the place where we would, for better and for worse, continue our lives together for decades to come.

Originally, our home was a twenty- by thirty-foot log cabin with a likesize upper story to it. We plunged into both the building and the living with great hope and anticipation. We had many, many gatherings of family and friends there over the next thirty-plus years. Our

home became a place of fun for many, a place of healing for some, a place of beginnings for our three children, a place of much prayer and training of children for many years; tragically, it ended as the emblem and ever-present reminder of all the mistakes I have made in life.

Prudence and I were not able to conceive children naturally, so we pursued adoption with joyful abandon. No child could ever be more “our own” than our three children—Caj, Simmons, and Abbay—that God blessed us with. I think it’s best said in the words of a needlepoint that hung in our home: “Neither flesh of my flesh, nor bone of my bone, you grew not under my heart but in it.” With the addition of our first child, we added on to our little log house and made it into a home that was just right for the three of us, which later would become the five of us.

Living on the bank of the Homochitto River in Franklin County, Mississippi, we had a life to be sought after by anyone who loves peace and enjoys the beauty of nature. We were blessed with great friends, a small but good church family at Bude Methodist, good employment for me in the law firm and Prudence as a college-level art professor at University of Southern Mississippi at Natchez. We were blessed.

Why I couldn’t see the storm clouds gathering, I don’t know. I am not sure they were obvious to many, but I sense my parents could see them. I was becoming, as had been predicted many years ago, “too big for my britches.” That is to say, I wouldn’t stay within the banks of that great life that was there for me. I was truly never satisfied; I always wanted more. My choice in life in every instance was “more”—more money, more cars, more horses, more alcohol, more relationships. I got more of all of the above, but there was still no peace, no contentment, no real joy. What I see now but didn’t see then is that with “more” there is a corresponding “less.” The more I had, the more I wanted; the more I wanted, the more I sought. All of this led to less peace, less focus on family, and losing sight of the foundation that I knew was the basis of life—Jesus.

The bottom line is what we just read in Proverbs 20:24 at the end of the previous chapter: a person’s steps are from the Lord. God wanted the Israelites to reach the Promised Land, but as they kept turning their backs on what His plan was, He allowed them to enjoy the fruit of their own choices. In Romans 1:28 the Bible says, “God gave them up to a debased mind.” You can choose not to obey, but you cannot choose the consequences. Jonah chose not to go to Nineveh, but the

storm he ran into was worse than the storm he thought he was running from. Jonah wanted to do things his way, not God's way; that decision is always wrong and it always comes with pain and loss.

Someone asked me whether I believe alcoholism is truly a disease. I guess in one sense it is a disease, but this writing has shown me that my path has been "drinking or preaching" since I was at least two years old. The choice of an alcoholic to all things in life—good and bad—is more! The "more" I sought after so hard put me on a collision course with everything I never wanted—disease (of mind and body), destruction (of family, home, health, finances, reputation), divorce, and death.

¹² There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death. (Proverbs 14:12)

We are surrounded by a culture of more of everything as being better. This is contrary to living life trusting God, who says, "My grace is sufficient for you" (2 Corinthians 12:9).

CHAPTER 22

PRIMA DONNA¹³

*"If you have been foolish, exalting yourself, or if you have
been devising evil, put your hand on your mouth."*

—Proverbs 30:32

"YOU ARE A PRIMA DONNA" is an accusation I heard many times from my father while I was growing up. Worse, I continued to face this accusation as a lawyer practicing with my father for almost twenty years. It was only in the process of writing this chapter that I ever actually looked up the dictionary definition of a prima donna, and after having done so, I think they could put my picture in there and be spot-on. It is not a definition of one's life that I enjoy, but it is tragically accurate.

On a hot southwest Mississippi summer day, I was thinking of the Homochitto River and drinking a few beers. Dressed in my summer river uniform of cutoffs, a straw cowboy hat, and sunglasses, I was behind the log house on the south bank of the Homochitto, performing my Saturday duty of mowing the grass. I heard the screaming sound of car tires losing a desperate battle to hold their purchase on hot asphalt and then a thunderous collision. Letting go of the mower, I sprinted to the front of my house and was greeted with the scene of two badly damaged automobiles, two young men thrown out of

13 \prē-mə- 'dä-nə\

noun

a very temperamental person with an inflated view of their own talent or importance
Synonyms: ego, self-important person, his nibs, temperamental person

a vehicle and writhing on the ground, and a young lady emitting ear-piercing howls of pain. This was the scene in my front yard.

This was long before cell phones, so I ran inside and called the Franklin County Sheriff's office, advising the dispatcher (probably Ms. Kitty Hardy) of the need for help and an ambulance as soon as possible. Then I went out front and began to check the condition of the victims who I quickly realized I knew as two young teenage men from our community and a young lady I didn't personally know but could tell from her tag she was local also.

A Mississippi Highway Patrol trooper arrived and began to check on the hurt and asked me when an ambulance might arrive. The young lady was pinned in her automobile, and the officer was concentrating on her. It seemed that my old friend Harold Wentworth was out of town with the ambulance, but another family member showed up in a van that was being converted into an ambulance. They asked if there was any way that someone could lead them to the hospital since they had no emergency equipment installed on the van.

Enter prima donna first-class: The officer was busy with the young lady, and his patrol unit was sitting there with lights flashing and motor running, and I, of course, said, "I got you. I will lead you in the patrol vehicle because the officer is too busy and can't go." Without another thought other than "Who in the world would ever question me?" since I am in charge of determining the right of any situation I am in, I got in the patrolman's car, hit the siren, and took off to the old familiar Franklin County Memorial Hospital, leading the makeshift ambulance.

What is wrong with this scene? In theory, maybe what I did was admirable. In reality, what I did was prideful, nonsensical, extremely disrespectful, not to mention illegal. "Who would question me?" I was doing what I thought was right. How could I possibly be wrong to take a patrolman's MHP car without his permission (as if he would ever give that) after having drunk several cans of beer while dressed in cutoffs and a straw hat?

This is a classic example of how I lived my whole life. I saw what was in front of me, I made a choice to do what I wanted to do, and I assumed everyone else would agree with me—after all, I have to be right, right? Wrong! There are boundaries in life for a reason; the stream banks are to regulate the flow of water, and the "rules of the road" and of life are there for a reason.

Prima Donna

Amazingly, I got the patrolman his vehicle back in fairly short order, and for reasons I can only speculate about, nothing was ever said. I suppose losing your patrol car is not something any law enforcement officer is anxious to report. Once again, God just provided me with cover that I desperately needed but did not at all deserve.

⁷ The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction. (Proverbs 1:7)

“cute” fits a baby well, and thinking we all enjoy the same actions out of an “adult” is the very definition of “prima donna.”

CHAPTER 23

CAN'T GET NO SATISFACTION

(CAN'T BUY ME LOVE)

"I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind."

—Ecclesiastes 1:14 (NIV84)

"YOU ARE NEVER SATISFIED, YOU never have enough . . ." is a line I heard from my father over and over through the years, and though truer words were never spoken, I just didn't hear him. I hear him now, and I have seen for myself that I lived most of my life never being satisfied. A close and candid look at yourself isn't comfortable, but it is a requirement in order to see real changes. Confronting my own shortcomings comes painfully—to reach your sixties and come to the realization that your life has been largely dominated by selfish and foolish motives and choices. This painful self-confrontation sometimes leaves me feeling as if my entire life has been wasted.

Today, I don't have that feeling; I recognize that we all have to come to a place where we see that there is one way and that is Jesus. We can, in my opinion and belief (based on Scripture and my experience), be born again; for me it occurred at age twelve, but it was very shallow and misdirected. That is a description of the majority of my life. I knew Jesus was the way, but I thought Jesus would accommodate what I wanted. There is no room in Christ to accommodate my way; He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life—there is no other way but Jesus.

Today, I have to see myself for who I really am and then let it go. I have to release the past and follow Paul's lead: "Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:12-14).

Living life in a "never satisfied" state of mind is neither easy to do nor pleasant to admit. That lack of satisfaction with what I had led me to serial futile efforts at trying to obtain significance in the eyes of others by something I had or something I did for them. This misses the real point that ultimately what people are moved by is simple love. I want to be loved; everybody wants to be loved. Love is not spelled with nor defined by anything you can put your hand upon. To be loved is to know that you have a secure place and that your life matters. There is no security in this world—because there is no possession, no title, no relationship, no acquisition that will give me, you, or anyone what we really want: satisfaction and peace in life.

Life comes with challenges, and when they come, there either is or is not a firm foundation. Here is a picture of that from the words of Jesus: "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it" (Matthew 7:24-27).

Anyone seeking peace and/or satisfaction through outside sources—possessions, friendships, achievements, family, sexual encounters, or any other outside source—will never be satisfied. The reason we will never be satisfied is that nothing from outside of us can ever satisfy what is lacking inside of us. There is a familiar saying that goes, "True peace is not the absence of war, but the presence of Christ." Never has more been said in such few words by man. Yet Jesus said it even better: "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10, niv). We were created to be in relationship with God. Our relationship with

God can come only through our being in a saving relationship with Jesus, who is “the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6).

As the result of my efforts to find peace, fulfillment, and satisfaction, in substantial part through the acquisition of things, I have mishandled all the resources God has given me and/or allowed me to receive. In chapter 1 of the book of James, we read: “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows” (James 1:17, NIV). I caused harm and loss to many—starting first with those closest to me and spreading out from there—all because I tried to extract from this world what it never had to offer: the peace that passes all understanding.

The truth that I had never faced is simply this: people want to be loved for who they are, plain and simple. I missed this, and I have always sought to try to create relationships based on doing/giving/having. It didn’t work, it won’t work, and it led me to financial disaster because I have never been satisfied. Whether it was an effort to purchase a camp on Lake Mary, owning multiple expensive offshore boats, possessing a gun a little better than yours, or having parties to win the favor and love of others, it was all a bust. It was all my effort to “buy” love; it was all an effort to propel myself into the center so that all attention was on me—not unlike being the center of attention with a stomach pump. There is a spiritual/scriptural principle that is unavoidable. Pride goes before a fall—every single time. You can write it down in the book. In fact, it is written in the Book: “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall” (Proverbs 16:18).

There is a related and even broader principle: God does not share His place with anyone. Self-promotion is the same as saying to God, “There is not room on this throne (heart) for both of us, and I want center stage.” God will let you have your way, but it always, always, always ends in disaster.

⁸ I am the LORD; that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols. (Isaiah 42:8)

These discoveries about myself are neither flattering nor easily arrived at; they are deeply painful and unsettling. It is also like uncovering wounds, exposing them to the air for draining and healing, which is necessary for healing and growth (this is a principle we all need to learn). This project was undertaken with one goal: an honest look at myself. An honest look at myself is not an exercise in flattery. In a search for truth and answers, honesty is a necessary guideline. The

demons of my life (of anyone's life) must be faced, acknowledged, and dealt with in order to grow and stay strong and to not be doomed to repeat the same tired old tragedies yet again. I don't ever want to burn someone's possessions, to put you or others at risk by driving while impaired, to harm people by selfish actions, to harm others by a poor example; more than all of that, it is my strongest desire not to dishonor God or usurp His place in my life. Yet, I know full well that as much as it seems I have come to know and am coming to know about myself, I have yet to plumb the full depth of my own sinfulness and depravity.

⁹ The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it? (Jeremiah 17:9)

This was written about my heart, but it will be important for all to know and accept it was not written about my heart only. Truly, truly, truly, I can do all things through Christ, but apart from Him, I can do nothing!¹⁴

We live in a world, in a country, and in a society where "more" is what is wanted and where an honest evaluation of what is needed is seldom given serious consideration. I have fit well into that world while not ever truly realizing that is where I was. The thought process of "why put off until tomorrow when you can borrow the money and have today?" is fatally flawed. Scripture says, "Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it?" (Luke 14:28, NIV84).

To reject the wisdom of this and other verses like it is to invite disaster and failure. I did all and suffered the consequences. In 1987, I cost my family a house by fire; in the first decade of the new century, I cost us another house by combining "you are never satisfied" economically with severe alcohol abuse to lose land and a home that have been in my family for more than one hundred years. Prudence, our children, and I suffered the extremely painful and destructive loss of a thirty-six-year marriage. It is not all my fault, but I created the foundation for failure by my pride and selfishness. These are difficult, extremely unflattering revelations. They are the truth.

"You are prideful, selfish, and self-centered!" Those harsh words were written to me by a friend. I recoiled at the friend's indictment of my character and thought to myself, "Obviously she does not know I have . . ." as I filled in the blanks with my "good deeds." I pondered the harsh words over several days and came to the realization that

14 Philippians 4:13; John 15:5.

she had given me a gift: allowing me to look at myself in a mirror and recognize that her characterization of me was spot-on.

It's good to give, but you have to look at the heart behind the gift. And if the heart supporting the gift is rotten, then the giving doesn't create soundness where there was none otherwise. My efforts at charity were my "good works" that were done to try to give myself peace. I had tried to obtain peace by taking, and I had tried to obtain peace by giving—neither worked. It was my effort to save myself. I was wrong, plain and simple.

Jesus said He "did not come to be served, but to serve" (Matthew 20:28). My efforts to serve have often been more about receiving than giving, seeking satisfaction from the people in this world rather than "working for the Lord" (Colossians 3:23). Another thing my father pointed out to me was, "You just never have enough, do you?" And again, his words are very true. The problem is not an economic one (I've never been a money-hungry person); it is spiritual. It manifests itself, at least in part, in regard to my economy; but underlying that is the very real issue of understanding God's grace. In God's economy of grace, there is no plan where I can work enough, give away enough, love enough to make myself acceptable before God. It simply doesn't work that way.

⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

My goal here is to face my failures and my flaws and to encourage you to learn from mine and to be willing to face your own. Yours and mine are likely not the same, but they are both real, they are both hurtful, and they must all be dealt with. Don't make the mistake of thinking this story about me is unique to me; it is not. This story is my story, but we are all in this story somewhere—and no matter how good you are, your place in this story is not and cannot be just the good places.

²³ For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (Romans 3:23)

A careful and honest look at yourself is neither pleasant nor simple, yet the results are profound and ultimately uplifting. It's also not a one-time thing but rather an ongoing process. Today is the right day to begin.

CHAPTER 24

YOU CAN RUN, BUT YOU CAN'T HIDE

“This terrified them and they asked, ‘What have you done?’ (They knew he was running away from the LORD, because he had already told them so.)”

—*Jonah 1:10 (NIV)*

A DEEP, WOUNDED GROWL WAS not the sound I anticipated as I stood gazing with early-morning mist in my mind in the predawn morning breaking around me. It was spring in the Mississippi River Delta area, and I was standing naked in the just-gray morning air on the deck of my camp on the bank of the Homochitto River—looking out over the river channel just north of its original confluence with Lake Mary in Wilkinson County, Mississippi. Not having immediate access to the inside plumbing, I stepped out onto the deck to relieve myself and was met with most unnerving circumstances. The growl could be felt as much as heard, and very slowly I turned to see a lone coyote that was wet, angry, hungry, and cornered. The feverish-eyed coyote stood behind me on the deck, having just escaped from the spring flooding of the Mississippi River, and he was lean, mean, wild-eyed, nothing but skin and bones, with bared teeth that seemed far too big for his razor-thin face. The land records in Wilkinson County showed the camp was mine, but a piece of paper was not a deterrent to this very sick, tired, cold, and angry coyote who had been fighting the flooded waters for days on end. Hungry and mad, the coyote was not in a yielding mood.

Normally he would have avoided confrontation with man, but his circumstances were life or death; he had exhausted himself fighting the floodwaters of the Mississippi River. In the gray predawn light, the coyote—lips drawn back and fangs exposed—was close enough to smell, and he was moving in my direction. I had a Ruger single-action .22 Magnum pistol, but it was in the main room of the camp. The coyote was between me and the pistol!

In the late 1920s, my namesake Great Uncle Hollis McGehee had acquired two large tracts of land in Wilkinson County, Mississippi. One was on an island on the west side of Lake Mary and the other in the Tunica Hills south of Fort Adams, overlooking the Mississippi River and the legendary Angola State Prison, the infamous Louisiana prison alongside the east bank of the Mississippi River. I had acquired a camp on the Homochitto River channel¹⁵ and we used it as a base camp for our fishing and hunting expeditions. The deeper reason for the Lake Mary camp, the one I would never admit even to myself, was a place to hide from God so I could do what I wanted to, far from prying eyes and family who I did not want to face.

The Lake Mary area has a certain aura of separation about it. It's what I call "really old dirt"; I guess it has been settled longer than the other areas around it, but the dirt there is no older than any other. This is a beautiful area along the Mississippi River banks, and it is as beautiful a place to seek after God as He has ever created. For me, it gave the illusion of a place to "hide from God," as if that were even possible. My effort to escape was a recurring theme in my mind: Knowing the call God had on my life, I was always on the lookout for a place tucked away in a corner, thinking if those closest to me could not see me, then I must be out of God's view also. The reality is that I was not then, nor at any other time, outside the view of man, God, my wife, friends, or parents. I just had a very wrong view of life at this particular time, and I had the sense that I could somehow hide from God and people and "get away" with living in a manner that dishonored all of them and me.

I am a little ahead of myself in the progression of this story, but today I realize the futility and foolishness of my thoughts. The very last thing I want today is to be where God isn't, if there even were such

15 This is the original channel referred to earlier—the channel the Homochitto had run in since creation until the Army Corps of Engineers decided to relocate the channel, resulting in a complete change in the very nature of the Homochitto.

You Can Run, but You Can't Hide

a place. Knowing God's presence, His provision, and His peace is key to breaking the addictive lifestyle. God is the only true answer to real joy and peace that was previously sought in bottles and ill-conceived relationships.

⁹Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go. (Joshua 1:9, niv84)

We seek peace in many ways, most of them ill fated and misdirected. I have found the place of quiet rest and peace—it is near to the heart of God.

CHAPTER 25

A SON IS BORN

“Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one’s youth. Blessed is the man who fills his quiver with them!”

—Psalm 127:3-5

I HAD A WIFE, BUT there were no children; it just seemed that life wasn't complete without a family. We had labradors and Australian shepherds aplenty and we loved them all, but they weren't children. We loved our horses too, but we sure wanted children. We finally found out that was not to be; there was a medical problem, and no children would be born to Prudence and Hollis. We adjusted, we adapted, we moved on. We can just party a little harder since we don't have to worry about children, right? We can live more and enjoy life more, right?

My secretary said, “You have a gentleman named Floyd Broussard holding for you on the phone.” I picked up and said, “Lying Freddy Lovett, what's up?” Freddy said something like, “You and your old lady still want to adopt a baby?” I said, “Absolutely.” I didn't call Prudence, but I didn't need to. I knew what her answer would be. Freddy said, “Well, I know this old gal over this way who is going to have a baby most any day, and I told her about you, and she wants to let you adopt this baby.” I don't know what I said next, but my feelings could be described as trying to find the right words to give to someone who just solved life's biggest dilemma—words are insufficient, but “thank you, thank you, thank you, Freddy Lovett.”

I called my dear friend and law school classmate Frank Dantone and told him the news, and from there we developed a plan. Frank got in touch with Freddy, and they started working together to make this happen. Frank, at his own cost, spent innumerable hours and days and nights traveling to and from his home and office in Greenville, Mississippi, to the hometown of the mother in an adjoining state. I never knew, and still don't know, the identity of the birth mother. Frank dealt with every conceivable issue—from groceries to remorse over her decision to loneliness to boredom to financial needs—all at no cost to us and spent great amounts of his time and resources. Eventually, things started to get out of hand, and the decision was made to move her to Natchez, Mississippi, to get her a doctor and medical care we knew was first rate, and it also ensured that our son would be born in the state of Mississippi.

Cousin Wilda McGehee Temple entered the picture as the local stabilizing force for the mother. Wilda was a perfect shoulder for the mom to lean on and a great source of comfort and encouragement with Frank several hours away in Greenville. Wilda expended her time, efforts, and resources helping the mother and serving as a liaison with the medical community where she worked. Wilda also took the mother out to eat, to movies, to visit friends and just generally kept this scared and alone pregnant mom from falling through the cracks, thus setting the stage with Frank, Freddy, and many others for the McGehee home to finally have a baby. I wish I could put into words the feelings we experienced, but they are truly indescribable.

On November 7, 1984, Micajah Mayes McGehee was born in Natchez, Mississippi. Mississippi law provides that children can't be adopted until they are seventy-two hours old, and that is the earliest a mother can sign a surrender of parental rights. Exactly seventy-two hours after Micajah "Caj" was born, Prudence and I were waiting at Wilda and Riley Temple's home in Natchez. I couldn't sit still; I was pacing up and down the street in front of their home as we waited for Frank and his young daughter Renee to bring our baby to us. The experience of having someone hand you a child, especially when you have waited many years, is indescribable—it's as if God were handing your child to you. In that one moment, our lives were changed forever.

I had a son; I felt like a warrior with a full quiver. Caj was and is a great blessing to us. We have had our challenges over the years, yet we have had our great times also. I don't know of any young man

who has had as many great opportunities to experience life in so many ways as Caj has—almost from birth. Caj was involved in every aspect of my life: he went with me to Colorado for depositions and then we went snow skiing; he went with me to Florida for depositions and then we went to Disney World; he went with me on a mission trip to Honduras; Caj accompanied me on a number of multiple-day and -night fishing and hunting trips to some really cool places. He experienced life in some grand ways from the time he was born until he was grown.

Caj has served as a military policeman in the Army and spent a year in Iraq. He is married to Sandra, and they have three children—Juston, Payton, and Jeanie—and they are all a part of our family. Truly, the Scriptures say, “Children are a heritage from the LORD” (Psalm 127:3), and that is the reality of my experience.

The greatest things in life aren't things at all, but the gifts God entrusts to us. Other than the gift of eternal life, there is no greater gift than the people God entrusts into our care for a time. May we all place a high value on the gift of life.

CHAPTER 26

GOD CALLS ME OUT

(IN THE LOWEST MOMENTS, GOD SPEAKS THE LOUDEST)

"And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers."

—Romans 8:28-29

In 1987, life for me reached a boiling point; it seemed that everything was burning out of control. There is an old story about a three-alarm fire in the city and how the little volunteer fire department from a neighboring country community came flying down the hill to the warehouse fire and drove right into the middle of it. The fire-fighters all jumped out and beat and sprayed and fought and snuffed out the fire. A reporter covering the warehouse fire told the chief of the volunteer fire department that the warehouse owner was making a donation to the department for doing such a brave and awesome job of putting out the fire and saving the warehouse. The reporter then asked, "Chief, what is the first thing you plan on doing with the reward money?" And the chief answered, "The first thing I am going to do is get the brakes fixed on that fire truck." By the time I got to Labor Day 1987, I felt kind of like that fire chief, and I told God that if He would let me "get this fire put out," the first thing I planned to do was get the brakes fixed on my life because I was as out of control as that volunteer fire department truck.

Let me back up to April. It was a Friday night, and after it was over, I felt like it could have been April Fool's Day; however, instead of being the first day of April, it was the last day, April 30, 1987. It was

a day that I have never and will never forget. Let me rephrase: it was a night I would never forget. I have already forgotten what the day was about, but not the night.

In April 1987, I was living on the Homochitto River with my wife and my almost three-year-old son Caj. Ten years earlier, Prudence and I had built a log cabin on that spot. However, when we adopted our first child, our son, we added on to the log cabin to make room for a growing family. We really weren't expecting more children, but we added a good deal of room for us to spread out and accommodate our growing family.

On this particular night, I don't know if I was using the excuse of getting away from the "terrible twos" or no excuse at all. What I do know is I was not home being a husband and a father; instead, I was (as I far too often was) at a party. When drinking, I did my best to avoid the highway and the attendant danger of driving while drinking. Regrettably, I am not speaking of the dangers of drinking and driving but the dangers of being caught drinking and driving. For my convenience, someone created a nightclub that was reachable from our house without ever getting on the highway. I often chose to cut through the back roads to a longtime watering hole with the infamous name of "The Pink Titty." It's about twenty-five or thirty miles from our home, and you could get all the way to the back door without ever getting on a state highway. In fact, the roads you traveled were the kind I liked, the kind that had the feel of a good place to "hide," where what you did was "undercover."

I was off work that day and had been drinking most of the day. The last thing I needed was to go in search of more, but "more" was my drug of choice. In fact, this characterized my whole life up to that Friday night—never satisfied and a "little more" would surely take me to that place of rest my soul was so hard after. The saying in Alcoholics Anonymous—"My drink of choice was 'more'"—fit me like a handmade glove. I always had to have more. It is the "why" of the "more" that led to the writing of this book. So, here I was, leaving my wife and child at home, heading off for more—for the bright lights, jukebox, and pool-shooting company of this country juke joint.

I got to the joint (aka by many as "Ione's Place") already well greased, but I immediately jumped full force into party mode. I was hanging out at the bar jawing with Ms. Ione and the others gathered there, buying cold longneck Budweisers for others and having them

bought for me. I got into pool shooting, and that was more excuse to continue drinking past my prime because I had a really good partner who could pretty much run the table at will. The hardest thing was keeping up with the beer the losers had to buy us. By the time I left around ten o'clock, I was beyond wiped out. Somehow I made it home in one piece. God's hand of divine providence is the only reason I could have made it home alive. I was in bad shape, as inebriated as one can be while retaining some level of consciousness. I couldn't and can't tell you one single thing about that trip home. No remembrance whatsoever. Totally blacked out.

One thing that was a constant for me at the end of a long day and night of alcohol: I was going to try hard to put some greasy food in my stomach before going to bed to prevent or at least help limit the damage through the night of spinning rooms and a sick stomach. I desperately wanted something to soak up the alcohol and help me fight the battle against hangover and depression the next day. It may just be perception, but I definitely believed it helped.

This night was no different. I was going for the greasy food like other nights—yet it was different because I was far too gone to be thinking about turning on a gas stove. That fact was lost on me. My selfishness and greed “to do what I want, to get what I want” easily won out over any common sense, which probably wasn’t there anyway. So, going for the one thing I knew I could cook with one eye squeezed shut, I cut up a couple of potatoes and turned on some grease on our gas stove in the older log cabin part of our home.

It was around eleven p.m., and my wife and son were in our bedroom, which was separated from the kitchen/living room area by an old-fashioned “dog trot,” an open breezeway. It was almost like two separate houses, but joined by a common floor and roof—you could party in the kitchen and not even know it from the bedroom area where Prudence and Caj were sleeping.

I got the grease going and put the cut-up french fries in the boiling grease. I was drunk and tired. I sat down in my big red-leather recliner in front of the fireplace, waiting for the fries to get nice and brown and crispy. That was a big mistake; but for God’s amazing grace, it would have been a fatal mistake—fatal for me and for two I truly loved, even though my actions sure didn’t show that love.

I awoke to flames and smoke all around me. I don’t know if it was the alcohol or the oxygen deprivation or both, but I truly did not know

where I was or who I was, and I had no idea what was going on. What I did know was I could not breathe at all. I was choking and gasping for breath, and there were flames all around me. I thought I had died and gone to hell. I tried to stand, but gravity and alcohol and smoke combined to put me on the floor; that is to say, God used these to put me in the only place where I could survive for even another minute. I was completely disoriented. The log cabin was engulfed in smoke and flames; I had no idea how to get out or even that there was an "out."

When I hit the floor, my desire to breathe caused me to lunge forward looking for someplace that afforded better breathing than where I was. What I found was the front of the wood heater in our fireplace, and when my hand hit that and the fireplace itself, it spawned a consciousness, a stored remembrance. Instantly, I knew who I was, where I was, and what was going on. It was a total wakeup, and I was completely clearheaded and knew what I had to do—and only by the grace of God I did it.

My first job was to get to fresh air, and the only way to do that was to crawl very low and very fast to the double French doors at the back of the log cabin. I reached the double doors and then was out those immediately. I raised myself up just enough to grab the door handle and let myself out.

My next job was to run to the porch/dog trot area and into the bedroom to get Prudence and Caj out of the house. The log cabin was fully engulfed in flames, but none were on the bedroom side of the dog trot. I woke them up and told Prudence, "The house is on fire, burning down! Get out now! I'm going for help." The fire had already destroyed the telephone line, and there was no service. I had to quickly get to the nearest neighbor, about two miles away. Prudence was responding to me and seemed to be in the process of getting up, so I rushed off.

The small town of Bude was two miles away, but nothing would be open. I had to go to someone's home to use a phone. The closest house belonged to an old friend, Mr. Lennox Murray; however, Mr. Murray was in his eighties, and I was concerned about bothering him and his wife. The next house was David and Mary Lou Webb's. I went to the front door, knocked and hollered, but got no response. I was desperate. I tried the door and it was unlocked, so I just went on into their home, hollering for help, for someone to get up and call the fire department. I got no response, and I didn't see their phone, so I left the Webb house to try somewhere else.

God Calls Me Out

I went to Timmy McNulty's house and got him up, and he called the fire department. I left to go back to check on my family, fight the fire, and see if there was anything I could save while waiting for the Bude, Meadville, and other volunteer fire departments to arrive.

I came driving up to the back of my house, but there was no Prudence and no Caj in sight. Panicking, I went inside and found they had gotten back in bed and fallen asleep. This time I just picked them both up and carried one under one arm and the other under my other arm out the back bedroom door to the vegetable garden. I put them down and gave them strict instructions: "Don't go back in the house." I still couldn't see flames in the part of the house where they had been.

I was headed back in to see what I could do. Amazingly, the local volunteer fire departments were there. They took over, ordered me out of the area, and told me to seek medical treatment for the smoke inhalation I had already sustained.

The fire departments that responded did a great job of getting the fire out and saving the majority of our home. The log cabin part of the home was destroyed; it had been burning for quite a while before I even got out, and then it took me quite a while to even get a call in to the fire departments. So, while they did a great job of responding, the log cabin part was essentially a total loss before they even arrived. The efforts of the fire departments saved most of the rest of the house. The only physical injuries were minor burns to my face and hands and smoke inhalation, for which I was treated at our local hospital where they had been caring for me since I was two years old.

Even as I sit here today, I really can't imagine how much pain my condition, my actions, and my foolishness must have caused my wife, my son, and my parents. As I look back on it now and think how I might react if one of my children had done this, I just don't know. I hope that I might ever be as gracious as they all were to me. God's grace in sparing me and my family is over and above all.

"I thank my family, and I thank God, and I will never drink again!" Right? Wrong! Sadly, no. It didn't reach me. I didn't get it. It would take more than almost dying in a fire. It would take more than almost burning my family up in our house. It would take more than a huge financial loss to our family and the insurance company. It would take much more before the message would finally come through.

Prudence, Caj, and I took up residence in the recently constructed pool house, a small, two-room structure just behind our house. We

were daily confronted with the prospects of wading through the soot and smoke and mess of the fire to recover and begin to rebuild what we had lost. The damages were in excess of \$150,000 to the home, plus contents. Of course, many things lost in a fire can never be replaced. We lost irreplaceable items of personal memorabilia, as well as other personal property. For many years, actually even to this day, I still hear things like, "Oh yeah, Daddy burned that up in the fire." It was a very painful chapter in all of our lives, all flowing from my self-centered, self-absorbed, seriously broken lifestyle. Tragically, the hurt was far from over yet.

Thirty days later (May 30, 1987) was Memorial Day weekend, the first long holiday weekend of summer. The calendar may deny it's summer, but life on the Homochitto River in late May clearly shows summer has arrived. Ninety-plus temperatures and high humidity say summer is here!

Holiday! Let's celebrate! Ricky Steele and I got on our ATVs (we only had three wheels back in those days) and were off on an adventure. Never mind that three-wheelers weren't licensed for use on the road; we drove them like they were. We were off on an adventure up through the Homochitto National Forest.

Leaving the charred remains and Prudence and my son behind, Ricky and I headed off on a route that took us through some of the deepest hollows and highest hills blanketed with giant towering pines, majestic white oak trees, delicate cowcumber trees, and iconic wild magnolias. Leaving my house, we crossed Porter's Creek (now the spillway for Lake Okhissa) and headed up through the steep hills and plunging hollows that lay just south of the Homochitto River along Berrytown Road.

We turned off through an old, closed Forest Service road, across branches and creeks and low-water bridges, among some of the most scenic forested lands one can see anywhere on this green earth. Our destination was the Homochitto at Eddiceton, on the Herring property. Our route took us through these beautiful and majestic forests and across a number of creeks and branches. McGehee's Creek flows directly into the Homochitto just below the place we were bound for.

McGehee's Creek exceeds my ability to give an adequate description, but I want to try anyway. McGehee's Creek catches and holds your eye and is your focus, first and foremost. The water is clear, but clear is not enough to say. It is so clear that it appears to be no more

than a rich pane of glass revealing the myriad of rocks and colorful clays lining the bottom of the streambed. The crystal clear waters are held in check by a soft and inviting sand cushion along one side and a peaceful mural of pines, oaks, river birch, and magnolia forming the opposing bank. How it could be necessary to add anything to such a scene to induce a high is beyond my understanding now. McGehee's Creek is one of the most peaceful, most idyllic places of great beauty in natural simplicity that God has ever devised.

The beauty of creation was juxtaposed with our loud machines, cigarette smoke, and a steady flow of Budweiser. I have always appreciated the natural beauty of our area, yet the ample provision of the forest and the creek were clearly lost on me as an all-encompassing forum where all needs could be met in silence and wonder. We were anything but silent, and our wonder was simply "When will we get there?"

We were headed to the sandbar of the river where we heard several friends were having a family gathering. They were congregating along the riverbank to visit, eat, and commune with one another in the comfortable setting of the Homochitto and its sandbars and vistas. The families were looking forward to a good family time. Our goal was a party, and for me "party" meant drink till you drop. Why would I break the law by driving my three-wheeler under the influence, up county roads and across private lands, to reach someone else's family gathering when my own family was gathered "under my nose" right at home? Today, writing this account, I don't have a clue how I thought such an approach, such actions constituted the "good life." In the same breath, I know the very real danger that it could easily be my life again. To lose all and turn back to that life only requires a little folding of the hands, a thought that all is well and I deserve to feel better to have my way. I have no desire to go back, and any notion that I could go back is a recipe for death.

When we caught up with our friends, their festivities were already well under way, as were ours. We had mastered the art of transporting cold beer by off-road vehicle, and we never missed an opportunity to stop along the way and enjoy our beer surrounded by the pristine presence of God's creation as it exists uniquely in Franklin County and particularly along the Homochitto and her tributaries. In other words, we (or, in fairness to Ricky, I) got drunk in the woods and on the creek and along the gravel roads as we headed to the party. When we arrived, my festivities were in full swing also. In the midst of

recovery and in the cold setting of this writing, I don't have the faintest notion what went through my mind as I attempted to pour more and more liquid in me to feel better. The "more" of my life was leading me to a precipice of disastrous consequences.

The evening was filled with jokes, family remembrances, food (not too much for me because I didn't want to mess with a good buzz), and much laughter. We danced on into the night, and finally it was quite obvious that it would be a challenge to get home on our ATVs (about a fifteen-mile trip through woods, railroad tracks, bridges, and backwoods roads). Ricky wisely suggested we catch a ride home and return for our three-wheelers the next day. My ill-advised response was "I rode the damn thing here; I will ride it home." Famous and almost fatal last words. Ricky, being a committed friend and putting aside his own well-being, said to himself, "I guess I better follow Hollis to make sure he gets home safe."

In what I most surely thought was being "macho," I buzzed off on my Big Red ahead of Ricky, traveling way too fast. We headed out to the main tracks of the Illinois Central, where we turned onto those tracks headed east. Ironically, these are the same tracks and in close proximity to where we had once defied the trains while standing on the railroad trestle with them bearing down on us. The stream of my life was at flood stage again, and I definitely was not "preaching."

A big, red Honda three-wheeler fits easily between the rails of the Illinois Central main east-west line through Franklin County. Drive fast enough, and you hardly feel the bumps of the crossties over which you are perpendicularly running. The ride was smooth and soothing—for a short distance. Running between the railroad tracks, lights off, main line, full out, all is well until all is not well. All ceased to be well when we encountered crossties turned the other way and protruding sharply above and opposed to our direction of travel. The ride ended abruptly; the ride ended ugly.

When I regained consciousness, someone was attempting to move me, and I was suddenly feeling a deep, deep hurt that was beyond my immediate ability or desire to endure or abide. Blood, swelling, broken facial bones, dirt, and creosote blocked my vision of who was inflicting this great hurt. Caring not who it was, my only focus was "No! Stop! You are hurting me too, too bad!" Feeling like a locomotive had hit me head-on and was now resting on my chest, I could not breathe at all, or so it seemed to me.

In reality, what was going on was that I had suffered a head-on collision with a freshly minted set of twelve-by-twelve creosote cross-ties. It was a long time before all that creosote would get cleaned out, grow out, and get completely out of my body, externally and internally! The bill when all was said and done was a broken kneecap, almost every rib on the left side broken to the point of being splintered, a broken transverse process in my lower back, and broken facial bones. Of course, we knew none of those details at that moment. The only thing I knew at that moment was that my old and dear friend Mr. Harold Wentworth was coming once again to transport me to an area hospital. It was far from the first time Harold had picked me up, and sadly it wouldn't be the last.

After a brief stop at Franklin County Memorial Hospital where they determined the damage was too serious to stay there, it was on to Jeff Davis Hospital in Natchez (now Natchez Regional Medical Center). I was admitted through the emergency room at Jeff Davis and into its intensive care unit, where I would remain for a while. Once again, my family was awakened in the night to deal with yet another calamity of my creation through an alcohol-infused night of incredibly stupid blunders on my part.

It's at this point that you (wife, son, mother, and father) start to look on the original shipping label and see what the instructions are to return the one causing such pain. Surely Hollis was sent to us mistakenly! Can't we just change his name and let him go? Why that wasn't done at that moment, I have no idea. I thank them and I thank God for that grace.

When I was released, it was back to the pool house where Prudence, our son, and I were crammed into one hot room. The other room of this two-room structure was filled with stuff salvaged from the burned house that stood silently by as a blackened but painful witness to and reminder of what Hollis and alcohol together could accomplish.

I was suffering from incredibly painful muscle spasms related to the multiple rib fractures. I was on a walker, and no doubt a terrible burden to my wife and my family again. It was a long, hot, painful summer because multiple broken ribs don't recover as quickly as some other body parts. I know that I had to be a load to Prudence, who was enduring a burned-out house, a child cramped into a tight space in the midst of exercising his demand for attention in the ongoing process

of the terrible twos, and a pain-in-the-neck husband. I was truly suffering as a result of my injuries, but my suffering didn't measure on the same scale as Prudence's and all the family to whom I consistently caused pain and heartache.

The rest of the summer and into the fall we were trying to resolve insurance claims on the house and contents. We were enduring the tearing away of the old and were being blessed with the building of the new. I was recovering from serious and painful physical injuries, while processing (or not) great emotional turmoil over the loss of very personal and irreplaceable family and historical artifacts from our first ten years of marriage and our lives before then. For me it was also, to some extent, the growing awareness that these were not just accidents; these were all the result of my own selfish, self-centered, foolish, and hurtful activities. Yet the full impact of those events only now, in the process of this writing, has started to soak in. Not until now have I begun to get a full sense of my life's blunders and tragedies—and the impact upon my family, others, and myself. It's been a long time coming, and it will take a long time going.

As summer drew to a close, I was finally beginning to get back to some rhythm in my life. Prudence was about to start back to school (teaching art at USM Natchez), and I was trying to get back into the full swing of a busy law practice. It seemed a semblance of normalcy was returning. We still were living in the pool house, but we had gotten into a better and somewhat more harmonious daily routine. So it was that we approached the last big event of the summer with clearer minds and a more sober approach: Labor Day 1987.

On Labor Day, Prudence and I farmed out our son to a babysitter. Our plan and our goal was a long and peaceful horseback ride through the quiet, austere beauty of the Homochitto National Forest. Our ultimate destination was a deep, clear swim hole that was shady and cool in Middleton's Creek, also a tributary of the Homochitto. The area we were riding was remote, and for all practical purposes not really accessible to anyone other than us and those whom the Forest Service permitted there for logging purposes. It was miles of trails and tens of thousands of acres of remote forestlands, crisscrossed with creeks, divided by hills and hollows. The swimming hole that we were bound for was at the place where the Texas Eastern pipeline crossed Middleton's Creek.

My horse was a huge and locally famous steed by the name of Clyde, and Prudence rode a young mare appropriately named Sassy.

We were loaded down with picnic supplies, suits for swimming, towels, and appropriate hot weather drinks (non-alcoholic). It seemed that the lessons of 1987 were sinking in, at least a little bit.

Living out the prophecy of her name, Sassy was charging ahead of Clyde. Suddenly, she reared up and shied violently to the side and away from the trail. Sensing danger, I quickly rode up to check on them. I immediately spied the source of the trouble. There was a very large and very agitated rattlesnake lying in the trail, fully armed and prepared for battle. "Prudence, you keep Sassy back, and I'll cut a stick and kill this rattler." I jumped down from Clyde, a huge, strong gelding all 1,800 pounds of which was one raw nerve at that moment. Reins in one hand, I pulled my brand-new, handmade, sharp-as-a-razor scabbard knife (a recent gift from friend Ricky Steele) from the side of my brown leather chaps. My plan was to cut a limb, kill the snake, and move on to the creek.

A large poplar tree was on my right, broken over from a recent storm. Still green, there were many limbs protruding from its downed trunk. I grabbed one with the intention of bending it back and whacking it on the back side to cut it and thus have a weapon to dispatch the snake, which was hissing and buzzing in a sickening fashion just a few feet away.

Prudence was hollering, the horses were jumping and rolling their eyes, and our dog was in full attack mode. I was in the process of bending this poplar limb over to obtain a weapon with which to do battle with "brer rattlesnake," as my dear friend and pastor Brother Mike Childs would say. The problem was that I was not focusing on the immediate issue at hand (a repeated fault that has led to repeated failures for me across time). Instead of watching my hand holding the limb and the point on the limb where I needed the knife to strike, I was trying to watch all the rest of the scene at once and take care of my dog, horses, and wife, but not necessarily in that order. Tragically and almost fatally, I had my eye on Prudence at the moment I should have been focused on the limb.

The strong, swift knife stroke to the limb didn't hit the limb; the knife struck my left arm just above my hand. I felt the blow in every nerve and bone in my body. Unlike a typical cut that doesn't have immediate pain, this blow brought with it a deep and long pain and opened a gaping hole in my left arm! I felt it all the way into the core of my being.

Prudence couldn't see me very clearly because of the bushes and the tree between us, but she knew something was dreadfully wrong when she saw me go down instead of the snake. I have never seen, in person or on screen, that much blood arrive that quickly and cover such a large area so completely. Instantly, my brown brushed leather chaps, my white sleeves-chopped-off shirt, my blue jeans, and a good area on the ground around me was covered in dark red blood that seemed to be erupting in torrents.

Squatted on the ground, I looked around and then up, and I said, "Lord, I have long wondered where and how I would leave this world, and now I see, for I know I only have a few minutes left here in this life." And with that I became instantly prepared to die right there. I fully expected to start fading away quickly.

What I had not planned on was that part of me which had always been with me (probably the same force that took me to the barbershop as a two-year-old): my hardheadedness, my fiercely independent and bullheaded nature came roaring to the front. I said to myself, "No! I am not going to die here. I refuse to give in to death. I have to stop this bleeding. I need a bandage and a tourniquet." In a similar way that I had come to in the house fire, I instantly knew what had to be done and how.

The bandage to stop the flood of life-carrying blood was a towel. That towel was packed in the right side of my triple-latched leather saddlebags. The tourniquet would have to be a strip off the other towel in the same saddlebag because I realized I had not worn a belt. I needed Prudence's help.

Prudence still didn't know what was going on, but she was about to find out. I spoke in what I hoped was a calm and reassuring voice and told her that I was cut, that I needed her to come to my horse, look in my saddlebags, and bring the two towels to me. She said, "I can't come over there. The snake is in the way." Efforts at calmness gone, I shouted, "If you don't come and come quickly I will die right here from loss of blood!" She got it.

Prudence negotiated her way past brer snake and got to Clyde and my saddlebags and got out the towels. I instructed her to remove a strip from one to make a tourniquet, and she said, "I can't tear it! Do you have a knife?" The look I gave her energized her, and she ripped the one towel in two and helped me put a tourniquet in place. Then we wrapped the second towel around the open wound and made plans

for the rest of our life. We were that focused and goal oriented and deadly serious. The sheer volume of blood forged a clear vision of the gravity of our circumstances.

Prudence was to go for the house through the woods to get a vehicle (this was before cell phones), and I was going to start walking out if I could. My last pleading comment to her was to please come back and get Clyde and take care of him once she got me some help. At that moment, I knew for sure there would be no Labor Day picnic on this day.

I sat for a bit, and then it dawned on me that I had responsibility for my own life. I began to walk. I hadn't gone very far before I met a vehicle driven by Sally Wallace, the wife of a logger who just happened to be working in those woods on Labor Day. Sally graciously abandoned her goal in order to help me achieve physical salvation at the Franklin County Memorial Hospital. (Truly you can see that FCMH and I have had a long and colorful history together and why I love her and all of her people out of both necessity and survival.)

Arriving at the ER, I was quickly seen by longtime friend and fine physician Dr. Elmo Gabbert. He told me, "We will get you fixed up here, and you can probably go finish your picnic." Now, in his defense, he was used to people overstating their circumstances, and at the time he made that statement, he had not yet removed my bandage (towel). He quickly did that, and when he looked and saw the arteries and nerves that were cut, he promptly said, "This is going to require expertise we don't have here. You need a micro-surgeon, and the only place you will find one of those on this holiday weekend is at University Medical Center in Jackson (about eighty miles away)."

My friend Harold Wentworth was out with the only ambulance on an emergency run to Natchez, so I had to catch a ride. My parents were out of town, Prudence was somewhere in the national forest taking care of our horses, and I was out of ideas. Doc suggested I call a "steady" friend who could immediately transport me to UMC, where he had called ahead to make arrangements for the proper surgeon to attend me when I got there.

Enter Elton Lewis, longtime friend and hunting and fishing buddy. He happened to be at home just a few blocks away (he was also next-door neighbor to my parents). He quickly came to the hospital. Dr. Gabbert contrived the largest and most heavily layered bandage I ever saw to try to keep the bleeding in check while on the way to UMC in Elton's Nissan pickup.

We started out with Doc's instructions to be safe but be quick about getting there—the sooner the better. I was soon finding I was maybe more afraid of that Nissan truck at ninety than I was the cut on my arm. That priority was short lived. Somewhere around Brookhaven, we hit a bump or I made a wrong movement, and soon the blood had soaked all the way through the eight-inch-thick bandage, and it was coming forth in abundance again. I then reassured Elton that I had total faith in him and his truck, and I needed him to milk it for all it would do so that we could arrive alive!

Thirty-plus years downstream, I still have numbness in my left hand and thumb, but we made it and the doctors at UMC did a great job. Now it is only a distant but very distinct memory. It was about the time the final bandages came off my left arm and hand that a clear and persistent bell began to ring in my mind. There is something I am missing here in this life. There are some things that are very wrong in my life. God is trying to get my attention, trying to wake me up. I have been a very poor listener, but I want to do better. I want to be better.

Twenty years after God spoke to me at Meadville Baptist Church and laid out the plan for me, I was about to wake up and begin the long process of listening to God and His call. When God first spoke to me on that night in 1967, I had the clear sense God was saying, "I want you to commit your life to serving Me." I got that for a little while, but then I was back on the track that I knew I was to follow of being a lawyer like my daddy, like I had planned to do since I was old enough (about five) to have a sense of a purpose in life. I had spent all those years since that revival not listening to God. Instead, I was listening to the voice of Hollis, a clear mistake.

The events of 1987 began the long process of restoring my spiritual ears, to start both listening and responding to God's call.

In the words of Samuel, as related to him by Eli: "Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening" (1 Samuel 3:9, niv).

| Life doesn't happen by accident; we must
| live life on purpose. Lord, help us to seek
and live Your purposes for our lives.

WAYPOINT #3:

THE STREAM IS RECHANNELED

GOD USED THE EVENTS OF 1987 to show me how completely I had abandoned the stream banks He originally laid out for me. Change began to occur, not overnight but over many, many nights; God drew me to Him and to His Word and prayer. This re-direction was the beginning of a seventeen-year process of change. It would take about three years for me to get refocused and start to draw much closer to God and let go completely of the old ways of thinking.

The changes weren't immediately obvious, but slowly over the next seventeen years God was at work and I was responding. During this time I had long periods of time when, other than work, the only reading I did was from the Bible or related literature. I did not watch television or pursue many of the pursuits that I had so enjoyed for most of my life. This was a time of great spiritual growth, but it also was a time of pridefulness as I noticed others and what they were not doing. It was not intentional on my part; in fact, I didn't even realize this deadly flaw at the time. There is no way to "overdo" God, but any movement into oneself is overdone—that was me, going too far not with God but with Hollis. A lot of good and even great things happened, but time would reveal that I was still leaning too much upon my own way of thinking rather than on the only real and true foundation: Christ Jesus.

For my family it was a great time of growth. I enjoyed years of very intentional prayer and Scripture memorization times with my children. We sought out and participated in every spiritual growth opportunity I was aware of, such as revivals, family retreats, seminars, and other similar events. I had devotion times with my children

in the mornings before school, and then we played together on our wraparound porches, on our trampoline, in the woods, on horseback, on bicycles, on ATVs. It was the best of times for my family life. It was also during this time period that I ran for and was elected as Chancery Judge over a four-county district. Great things took place over those approximately seventeen years. It seemed that, in the penetrating words I heard recently, it was a time of “preaching,” but unfortunately the sermon was way too much me—the only sermon that works is Christ and Him crucified.

CHAPTER 27

AND THEN WE WERE FIVE

*“And I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons
and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty.”*

—2 Corinthians 6:18

SIX YEARS AFTER THE MIRACLE of Caj's birth, an attorney friend who had visited in our home and met Caj and knew we wanted more children called and said, "I have another baby for you and Prudence if you still want to adopt another child." We quickly acquiesced. In fact, this happened twice with the same lawyer in fairly short order, and all of a sudden we had two daughters added to the McGehee quiver, and then we were five.

On April 24, 1990, our first daughter, Simmons Tait McGehee, was born. Three days later we traveled to Laurel, Mississippi, where we picked Simmons up at a Shoney's restaurant. My longtime secretary and dear friend Vanessa Walker, along with an old friend, once again helped facilitate that delivery. When Vanessa handed us Simmons, it was just as exciting as the delivery had been with Caj. How do you describe the event of someone handing you a child who instantly becomes the centerpiece of your life and family? Adoption has been an awesome experience for us. Many years and challenges later they are each yet growing in our hearts.

In 1990, the third call came: "I have another baby for you and Prudence; in fact, I have two—a boy and a girl. If you don't want both children, I have someone else who wants a child very badly,

but it's your choice. If you want both children, I will make that happen." We decided it would be selfish to deny the other couple one child while we took two and had already been blessed by two. We deferred and told our friend that we would take one child, and the other couple could choose first. On August 17, 1992, Abbay Elizabeth McGehee was born into our family. Three days later we were waiting—where else but at Shoney's Restaurant in Brookhaven, Mississippi—to meet Abbay for the first time ever. Just like with Caj and Simmons, one of the most precious moments in all of life was to be handed another beautiful child, a daughter, a gift from God. Throughout the girls' lives, I have always joked with them that we picked them both up at Shoney's, a great place to get children. Abbay once asked me where at Shoney's, and I said between the buffet and the salad bar for Simmons and between the salad bar and the dessert bar for Abbay. We have been very open with all three of our children about their adoption since their births. We always tell them, "Most people have to take what God gives them; we chose you, you are adopted, you are special."

I wish that I could report that I have been a great dad to all three children all the time. I can't give that report because another flood was on the way, but it was years away and God blessed us all to plant good seeds—God seeds—into their lives for many years. We had a daily routine of morning devotions and prayer together at the breakfast table. We memorized Scriptures and kept a journal of our daily activities (looking back at those journals is a great comfort and a pain to me). It is a joy to look back at the great times we had for quite a few years. Sadly, later there came a time when I abandoned them for selfish, destructive habits—destructive to them and me and our family. How could I have lost the vision? How could I have become so self-centered? The same way anyone can—by trusting in my own sense of direction rather than trusting God. I know that they were hurt by my failures, but I also know that God is tending the seeds He planted in them and He has a plan for their lives.

Caj is married and has three children. Simmons is a registered nurse, married to Kevin Copeland; they have a daughter, Adelyn. Abbay is an EMT; she is going back to school and is raising her daughter, Kylee. All three of our children are gifts from God, each unique, each special, as are all of God's children. We are all created in His image and put here to love Him and be in relationship with Him.

And Then We Were Five

There is no greater desire in my life than to see my children loving and serving God in the unique ways He has gifted each of them. I am sixty now, and I am still trying to figure out my path in life. This is teaching me to be more patient and more trusting of God and His promises, including His promises in each of these three special children, each one a gift from above.

There was a needlepoint that hung in the children's bathroom that expressed our feelings for them as well as anything I could ever say:
“Neither bone of my bones nor flesh of my flesh, you grew not under my heart but in it.”

CHAPTER 28

GOD'S GRACE AT WORK

(IN GOD'S PERFECT TIME)

*"Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is
the LORD's purpose that prevails."*

—Proverbs 19:21 (NIV84)

THERE ARE MOMENTS IN EVERY life that just don't make sense, moments and events when everything seems to point toward a tragic ending, but for reasons unknown, the person escapes what seems to be certain death. I am not surprised at these moments, but my question is "How and why has my life involved so many of these moments?"

Riding motorcycles has been a part of my life for many years. I have ridden through quite a few states and even ridden all the way across Mexico on a mission trip back in 2000. There is an old saying among motorcycle riders: "It's not a question of 'if' but 'when' you will go down." Everyone who rides expects to encounter a moment when there is an unscheduled dismount—a collision or crash of some kind. I have been blessed to avoid that with the exception of a couple of low-speed "parking lot" type mishaps. This story is about one of the times I avoided a crash that was nothing short of a complete unexplained act of God's grace that was truly miraculous.

I was riding a new black Honda Valkyrie Interstate; we were two-up, my wife and I. We were on a weekend getaway to Natchitoches, Louisiana. This was our second trip over, and we left on a Thursday

with plans to return on Saturday. The trip to Natchitoches is a classic ride through some of the most beautiful pine timberland in northwest Louisiana. Our ride that Thursday was one of those special uneventful days on a bike when everyone seemed to be watching out for bikes; the ride was scenic and pleasant.

We had reservations to stay at the Judge Porter House Bed and Breakfast in Natchitoches, and we arrived at the close of a bright sun-drenched day. Our time in Natchitoches was exactly what we were looking for: quiet, peaceful, and just us. A time to read, reflect, visit, and walk along the river, it was a time of restoration.

Having enjoyed our two nights away, we headed out on Saturday morning on the four-hour trip back to our home on the Homochitto River in Franklin County, Mississippi. We stopped late morning at an excellent roadside barbecue spot in Louisiana and enjoyed a sandwich, a cold drink, and a chance to stretch for a few minutes. We left the barbecue joint and set our sights for Natchez, Mississippi, where I knew we would be stopping for fuel. Our bike, the touring version of the Honda Valkyrie, was a fine-looking bike but also very stable, quite powerful, and handled well. It was black and loaded with chrome—one of those the rider feels really good about.

After refueling in Natchez, we got on the historic and winding Liberty Road running east out of Natchez that terminates at Mississippi Highway 33 in the Knoxville community over in Franklin County. Liberty Road is very curvy, hilly, and scenic. The narrow roadway is framed with high banks unique to the Natchez area, called "loess bluffs." We were coming close to the end of a classic three-day motorcycle mini-vacation—cruising along Liberty Road and enjoying music. Prudence was reading her book in her back saddle on the Valkyrie. The radio program I was listening to changed over to a Christian talk radio program, and the speaker began to talk about the absolute sovereignty of God.

We were out past Second Creek Grocery and had just come up a hill and around a right-hand curve into a short straightaway that led into a left-hand curve. Just as I entered that straight stretch, the Christian speaker proclaimed, "No one leaves this world until God is completely ready to receive them into His hands." At that very moment, an older-model black pickup with an overhead rack loaded with lumber and pulling a trailer full of junk of every kind was coming our way. The truck crossed the centerline, was fully blocking my lane, and its front was on my shoulder and headed for the ditch on my

side. In short, this truck and trailer were dead in front of us and had both lanes and the shoulder blocked. There was nowhere to go! There was no escape route; the only option was the ditch, but the truck was headed that way, cutting off that possibility. The choices were: try to beat the truck to the ditch or hit the trailer. I was traveling at about sixty miles per hour, and neither option provided a survivable option. The time frame was less than two seconds from observation to “D-Day.”

With no option, I pointed the bike for the ditch, trying to get there ahead of the truck and trailer. I had no sense of any option short of a deadly crash. I left the road and hit the grass with the words ringing in my ears: “No one leaves this world until God is ready for them.”

I have no explanation for what happened—none! I turned to my right, hit the grass, and then saw only grassy shoulder and roadway coming up in front of me. With no idea how—other than the grace of God—we were on the other side of the truck and trailer. I had no idea then, nor do I now know, how that happened. There was no escape; there was no place for us to go. We came out without a dent or a scratch. Prudence didn’t even look up until we were in the clear and never even realized what had just happened.

I drove on for a few miles before I pulled over and experienced a trembling from my head to my toes. I had faced certain death and then been delivered—a last-second reprieve—and to this day, I have no idea how it happened. It was as miraculous as the parting of the Red Sea; in some fashion God parted the way and gave us safe passage through a deadly solid object, or perhaps took us over it or around it in some unknown fashion. All I know is there was no way out of that confrontation alive, yet there we were: alive, well, without a scratch.

No one leaves this world before God is ready! Clearly God wasn’t ready; there truly is no other explanation for how we cheated death that day. It just wasn’t God’s time or will for our departure.

¹⁶ Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be. (Psalm 139:16, niv)

OFTEN IN SPITE OF OURSELVES,
GOD BRINGS US THROUGH AND
IS ALWAYS OUR SHELTER.

CHAPTER 29

OUT OF PLACE

“In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle . . .”

—2 Samuel 11:1

DAVID WAS NOT WHERE HE was supposed to be, and he suffered a fall with Bathsheba. I was not where I was supposed to be, and I suffered a fall of a different kind—but the principle is identical.

It was November. I was Chancery Judge over four counties in southwest Mississippi and scheduled for court in Magnolia, Mississippi, that day. I was contacted by phone that morning and advised that my cases for that day settled. I had work I could and did need to do, but I elected to stay home for the day. Instead of going in to work and taking care of other business, I decided instead to take the day off and enjoy time alone in the woods along the Homochitto River.

It was a crisp, bright fall morning, a great time to get on my ATV and ride the trails on our farm, to enjoy the hills, hollows, woods, and streams on our place. Since deer season was just a few days off, I decided to check on the placement and condition of our deer stands—looking for any dangerous conditions, obstructions, or wasp nests. This work was definitely needed, but mainly I was just looking forward to being in the woods by myself. My wife had already headed out to New Orleans to pick up her mother at the airport, so she would be gone all day. My three children—Caj, Simmons, and Abbay—were all in school. I was supposed to be at work, but I had the day to myself and I thought, *Why not enjoy it?* The world, the part that needed to

know, was of the opinion I was in Magnolia, working. That was what the schedule called for: court in Magnolia. Our schedule was usually set almost a year in advance. I decided not to go “out to battle” that day; I would just sit this one out, stay at home. I loaded up on the ATV and was off through the woods, enjoying the beauty of God’s creation.

I made a pass by several stands, none of which needed repairs or other work. I arrived down at the sandbar on our side of the Homochitto. The sandbar there is probably close to half a mile long, so I just continued with a slow and easy look up the sandbar along the tree line, searching for deer signs, trails, scrapes, and rubs. It was a cold but beautiful November day, and I was happy just to feel the warm sunshine and enjoy the natural beauty of sand, water, woods, and crystal-blue sky. It was a great, great day.

Driving along the river, up the long sandbar, I was engaging in a favorite pastime: looking for driftwood, unusual rocks, arrowheads, old bottles, and ancient handmade bricks heavily worn by the sand, water, and time. I call it “treasure hunting.” I then headed off the sandbar to an area just north of an old camp we built back in the sixties. This is one of the most remote sections on our family farm. It’s about a mile and a half from the nearest public road, only accessed on foot or, with some maneuvering, on an ATV. It is a beautiful area with very sandy soil, heavily populated with a variety of tree types but primarily big oaks with lots of vines, briars, and thick clumps of blueberry bushes.

Historically, this area had been very productive for deer. Two of the larger deer ever taken from our property were killed by Johnny Monroe Sr. and Johnny Monroe Jr. in this exact area. In fact, the stand I was going to check on was a stand that Mr. Monroe had put up some fifteen years earlier. Mr. Johnny Monroe Sr. had been our county agent for many years; he had worked with 4-H and had been a very positive influence in my life and in the lives of many young boys and girls growing up in Franklin County.

I stopped the four-wheeler in a nearby open area and started out on foot for Mr. Monroe’s stand. The area I was walking through was more densely wooded, with thick briar patches, and the old stand was located in a large pine that had an oak tree growing immediately adjacent to it. The stand had metal steps nailed into the tree, and the steps had been there so long that the tree had grown around and over them, leading up to the deer stand.

I climbed the metal steps and then stepped up onto the metal conduit pipe, which formed the frame of the stand. I was about to step over into the floor of the stand, from above, to make sure the floor was solid, there were no wasps, and it was generally safe. I put my hand out to a large limb on the adjacent oak, to use as a steady point while I stepped over into the stand. (Imagine a handle you would use to steady yourself as you stepped into a tub or shower, except this stand was a little bit higher than a tub or shower.) The limb was out in front of me, and while it looked good, it was rotten. When I grabbed it, the limb disintegrated like powder. Down I went, and as I fell, I had the clear sense: "This is not going to be a harmonious outcome."

My next conscious thought was a feeling of great pain in my back and legs. The pain was so intense that I couldn't move. I was temporarily paralyzed from being able to move, and I knew in my heart and mind that moving right then was not a good plan.

For a few minutes I thought, "No one knows where I am! I cannot move, my back feels broken, I am going to die right here by myself!" Almost as soon as I had that thought, the following song flowed right out of my mouth: "Give thanks with a grateful heart, give thanks to the Holy One, give thanks because He's given Jesus Christ, His Son, and now let the weak say 'I am strong.'" Instantly, I knew that I would be all right. I didn't know what the outcome would be, but I knew I was going to be all right. I knew that I was not alone; I was reminded we are never alone, ever!

After the praise and worship concert (that's a joke because all who know me know that my singing is pathetic), God seemed to say this to me: "By the way, you do have a cell phone with you." The whole cell phone thing was fairly new, and I had forgotten I had one with me. I knew it had been in my jacket pocket earlier, so I started patting pockets (my hands were working, but my feet and legs and back still seemed to be nonfunctioning). I then started feeling around with my hands on the ground around me, and the phone was essentially right on top of my head, meaning it was just above my head on the ground.

I called Vanessa Walker, my secretary for many years and a dear friend to me and my family. She dispensed help, first through her husband, Bill (also a lifelong friend), and through first responders and others. Soon the woods were crawling with great Franklin County friends who always respond quickly and with great ability, care, and concern in times of trouble in our county. Just as they had helped so

wonderfully in the 1987 fire, they were back with the same diligence and great timing in this newest difficulty.

First responders carefully placed a backboard under me and brought me out, partly by hand carrying and partly by ATV. We finally met an ambulance on the dirt road that traverses a part of our family farm. The next stop was—you guessed it—the Franklin County Memorial Hospital Emergency Room, where I have made regular visits since I was two years old.

Dr. W. B. Larkin was the attending physician, and after X-rays he reported that there were two fractured vertebrae, L4 and L5. Dr. Larkin, a great doctor and friend of many years who contributed greatly to the health and welfare of the people of our county, said he would have to pass me off to a neurosurgeon at Baptist Memorial Hospital in Jackson. So it was back to the ambulance for another ride with my friend Mr. Harold Wentworth. They told me I would have to remain on the backboard, which by then I had discovered was almost more painful than the injury. I spent the next ten hours or so strapped to that backboard, and while it may be a “life-saving” device, it is also an instrument of torture. I remember telling a nurse who was accompanying me in the ambulance that day, “If you would stop and let me off this backboard, I will gladly get out and just hitchhike home!” I think I would have done anything to get off that backboard.

God blessed me. I have backaches today, but I can do most anything I want to do. I can only say, “Praise be to God for His generous mercy and grace poured out over and over in my life.” I especially thank Him for giving me a song to sing and friends to help me out of a deep hole again!

In writing this account, I have for the first time consciously come face-to-face with my own tortured history of very significant injuries and other tragedies. I have listed quite a few, but there are a number of others I have omitted: being struck by lightning in a boat, being caught in a series of waterspouts offshore, hitting a huge manatee in an offshore boating accident, being caught in the path of two oceangoing vessels in the main channel of the Mississippi River with a dead engine in my boat, surviving another significant fire while asleep in an apartment in Oxford, getting my foot caught in the tracks at the depot in Brookhaven with a train coming and my mother pulling me out of my shoe at the last minute, being in a car that went off a bridge on River Road at high speed, passing between two huge trees and none of us

getting hurt, falling through a bridge with a horse, surviving cancer, living with diabetes and COPD, being placed on oxygen and breathing treatments, living through several more significant wrecks, bankruptcy, foreclosure, and now divorce. You get the picture; I have been through a litany of serious mishaps, far more than most people experience across a normal lifetime. But I never really got that picture—not until now. I remember an older friend, Joe Frost, stating many, many years ago, “You are an accident looking for a place to happen.” I think I didn’t understand at the time, but I am beginning to understand today.

One of the things I have had to confront in going through this reflective process is why all these things have happened. I have never done any of these things on purpose, especially not purposed the outcome, although I have to admit I put myself in most of the positions that resulted in these various events. I think no one accidentally has as many accidents as I have experienced. I can honestly say that I have never intentionally hurt myself. Yet, dating back to about two years of age, I have over and over and over caused or allowed myself to be put in a position of danger and/or harm.

I could speculate about all sorts of psychological issues, but simply put, it’s my sense that: first, I have done some really foolish things, and I have to accept full responsibility for those; and second, God has known and wanted me to come to know that His hand is upon me for a reason, and He knew what it would take to get my attention. Naturally one would say, “That doesn’t make sense. You are in your sixty-fifth year; your time for service is past.” God’s timing is perfect, and He is never in a hurry. He has a plan for each of us, and when we look back, we see how some men’s/women’s purpose was not revealed until they were much older than I am now. Further, we might not see or know our purpose while we are still in these bodies. So, I close this chapter with this essential spiritual truth: “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight” (Proverbs 3:5-6, niv84).

IT IS THE PLANS OF GOD, NOT THOSE OF
MAN, THAT ULTIMATELY PREVAIL. LET
US LOOK TO HIM FOR HIS GUIDANCE.

CHAPTER 30

PREACHING

(THE RIVER FLOWS IN NEW CHANNELS)

“Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him, and he will act.”

—Psalm 37:5

WHEN A MAJOR FLOOD SUBSIDES and the river returns to its normal levels, it sometimes has cut a new channel—a change of direction in the flow of the river. When the twentieth century drew to a close, I too was flowing in new channels, channels that were getting deeper and stronger. This once-in-every-other-lifetime change-of-century marker was a harbinger of new directions God had in mind for me, or rather for Him through me. So, it was quite amazing to me when God called me to preach at Beauregard United Methodist Church in Copiah County. This was an experience like none other I have ever had.

I was invited by Ron Barham, district superintendent of the Methodist Church, to go with him to Beauregard to—I thought—fill in for a time. When we were driving up to the church, Ron mentioned we were going to have a “covenant meeting.” I said, “Ron, *covenant* is a word I don’t normally think of when filling in.” He looked at me with a Ron Barham “I am up to something” look and said, “Well, I may not have told you everything.” By then, we were getting out of the car and walking in the front door of the church, so there was no more time for discussion.

Promptly I was taken into a meeting with about six or eight of the people from Beauregard. We had a great meeting with them asking me

about my life: who I was, where I was from, what kind of work I do, my family, and similar questions. Then one man, Adrian Hyatt, asked me, "Brother McGehee, do you believe God called you to Beauregard?" My eyes beginning to pool with tears, I responded like this: "Brother Hyatt, an hour ago I had no idea where this church was. Sitting here right now in this meeting, I know for sure more than ever before in my life that I am in exactly the right place." I will never forget that meeting; I felt as if my search for meaning had reached its final resting place.

Beauregard was a loving and encouraging place to minister. The people were very patient and far more kind than I could ever deserve. While I know there was so much more I didn't know than what I did, the time there was very rewarding and fulfilling. Yet there came a time when I felt that I just wasn't giving enough at Beauregard because it was approximately fifty miles from home. I didn't feel I could do all that I needed to from that distance, especially with the other various duties I had committed to. I sought God's help in redirecting the flow to a place nearer to home, a place where I could daily spend as much time as possible ministering to the congregation, their families, and the community in general.

I was then redirected to a church just a few miles from our home: Ebenezer United Methodist Church. Just as Beauregard had been a really good fit to begin with, so was Ebenezer. I think the key to all this, as Scripture confirms, was love. Without mutual love, the whole process gets derailed. But God gave all of us the grace to love one another, and the love lived out among these kind people in vibrant and encouraging ways smoothed over my less-than-optimum performance as a pulpit preacher. Like my childhood experiences at Bude Methodist, we all can stick one another at times with our quills, but Christian love lived out in a church will carry you through.

There is, however, another side to pastoring churches, and I believe it is likely true at any church you might choose. Unexpectedly, pastoring often drains the spirituality out of the one called to give it to others. I found my whole spiritual growth cycle had come to an end. Instead of growing and flowing, I was beginning to become stagnant. Some have said this phenomenon comes from the fact that "sheep bite." But while that is a true statement in general, in my case it was more about my lack of commitment to God. We are not called to serve people, but to serve God in and with the people. If we try, as I was doing, to serve people rather than God, we will fail. We will become

exhausted and spent in our human effort. I did that very thing; it was all me, and “all me” produced the same result it had produced for the previous fifty-one years. This truth is not at all limited to pastors. All who seek to follow God must see God as the Master they serve. No matter what our place of service is here on earth, our true Master, the one we are put here to serve, is God.

By early 2005, my spirituality was at an all-time low; my tank was empty. I began to question my salvation, my whole standing with God; I felt like I was not being productive, and that became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Then came the fact that my whole focus on my family had slipped away, and my thoughts and actions began to look more like that a lost sheep than a shepherd. My “pool of life” had become worse than stagnant; it had become putrid. Somewhere in this process I made the oft-repeated mistake from the past of seeking relief in alcohol.

Some people would differ with this analysis, but I don’t believe (based on Scripture) that I was “lost”; however, I did get way off course and wandered far from the warm fellowship God desires. In that sense I was definitely wandering in the wilderness, a wilderness created by my own pride and self-centeredness. In the prophetic words recently proclaimed over me, I had “quit preaching and gone to drinking” again!

In early 2006 I stepped down from the pulpit, from serving Ebenezer; the river was running outside the banks again. I had fallen, jumped, dove into a river of selfishness, a river of hell, a river of destruction, a river of death.

THE LORD GIVETH AND THE LORD
TAKETH, AND SOMETIMES WE THROW
THINGS AWAY. NO FORCE THAT I KNOW
OF IS MORE DESTRUCTIVE THAN A
DRINK IN THE HANDS OF A DRUNK.

WAYPOINT #4:

THE FLOOD RETURNS

THIS IS SO PAINFUL TO write about because I can see so clearly now the pieces of the puzzle that led to this crash. I can see that the loss of respect for God's Word and His protective boundaries and a sense of entitlement on my part were the key elements to this downfall that hurt so many in so many ways. The burden of bearing the weight of all these losses is almost more than I can bear when I dwell on it. The path could so easily have been different if I had just given to God that which is always His—my all. Yet, I also know that He has forgiven me, I have made and am trying to make amends, and life moves on. Not by way of excuse or to lessen my own responsibility, but I think of so many people in biblical history who had major failures but looked up and got up and lived to see another day, and that is my great joy today—seeing what God is unfolding. Sometimes He just takes my breath.

CHAPTER 31

THE FLOOD OF A LIFETIME

(A FREE FALL FROM GRACE TO THE PIT)

*"What the true proverb says has happened to them:
'The dog returns to its own vomit, and the sow, after
washing herself, returns to wallow in the mire.'"*

—2 Peter 2:22

HAVE YOU EVER CONVINCED YOURSELF of the purity of your motives, knowing deep inside that the real truth is not so “good”? I told myself I was stepping down from the bench (May 1, 2005) and the pulpit (January 2006) to return to the private practice of law. Recently, after creating a time line of events across my sixty-four-plus years, I have come to realize this was part of a pattern of periodically changing directions across my entire life. Looking at my time line, I now see that I have changed directions over and over every six to ten years. I was changing directions in search of my true path while knowing the path I was taking was not God’s will—it was pure Hollis! It was wrongly conceived and executed in a vacuum of running to selfishness and self-indulgence while running away from God.

The results were predictably tragic. I don’t know the physiological basis of this sad principle, but I do know the practical side of it. An alcoholic’s return to drink isn’t a new bout of alcoholic behavior; it begins below the lowest point previously experienced and goes down dramatically from there. In other words, when a former alcoholic

returns to his old ways, he quickly finds himself in much worse shape than he ever experienced before.

Like a flooding river, out-of-control drinking (any drinking by an alcoholic is, by definition, “out of control”) is destructive and life altering. Following about twelve years of sobriety, I returned to drinking socially and within a very brief time period was being completely controlled by large quantities of liquor. I began to make decisions that had no thought beyond immediate pleasure and self-indulgence. In short, all of the great strides of living a Spirit-led life quickly gave way to a life controlled purely by the flesh. No matter who we are, the ways of man are never the ways of God; proverbially the way that seems right to us leads to death.¹⁶

In summary, from mid 2005 to the summer of 2008, I went from being a respected judge and loving pastor to a person with no direction and no outwardly visible moral compass, from a man of prayer to a man of lust for more and more of whatever gave relief, even if it came at a high price. I had completely destroyed my marriage, failed my children as a father, failed all my friends as someone worthwhile to look to, ruined my health, and brought financial disaster to all of us.

By 2008, I was passing out at night in my “man cave” (a building I constructed behind our home on the Homochitto River) and then rising well before dawn to resume drinking vodka at a rate of at least one half gallon a day. During that time period (May 2005 to August 2008), I had been arrested and pled guilty to one driving while intoxicated; been arrested, tased, and charged with a second driving while intoxicated; had several wrecks, the last one of which I have no idea what happened and I was thrown through the windshield and refused medical attention even though I was badly cut, bruised, had a dislocated jaw, and (as later demonstrated by X-ray) fractured my skull; had bladder cancer; been to treatment for alcohol and left; been fired from my job as prosecutor (understandably); gained about fifty-plus pounds; was diagnosed with COPD, put on oxygen, and had been in ICU with a dangerously aggressive case of pneumonia; blown large amounts of money on ill-conceived projects that existed only to serve me; and most tragically, had been running from God.

The “bridge too far” where my life had landed could only be reached by completely abandoning every trademark of normalcy. You arrive at a station in life (if “life” it can be fairly called) where the only conscious thought process is the next drink, and if a drink is not

16 See Proverbs 14:12; 16:25.

available, you want whatever takes you out of where you are, that makes you feel any better than you felt a moment ago. So everything in my life was geared toward preserving the flow of “feel better” and carefully avoiding any degree of self-awareness. Under no circumstances was I going to confront the man in the mirror. At some level, I knew what I was doing in my daily drinking. I knew what I was doing to myself and my family and all whom I loved. Because I knew that on a certain level, I am without excuse. But I never allowed my mind to go there; I didn’t permit the entry of a conscious thought about such things. It was too painful, and it might have disrupted what I wanted to do, which was stay drunk and keep the medication flowing.

Today I fear anything that I might use to help me get through the day. Getting through the day is called living, and living must be done by staying in the moment. To live is to accept each moment as real, present, and necessary; anything short of this is an invitation to a fall. I have taken a lot of falls in my life, but at this stage I have to take full “fall precautions” because a fall now would be fatal. I am not afraid of dying, but I am terrified of not dying sober.

My life was captured in a song Merle Haggard and Willie Nelson sang: “Reasons to quit / The smoke and booze don’t do me like before / And I’m hardly ever sober / And my old friends don’t come around much anymore / . . . The low is always lower than the high / And the reasons to quit / Don’t outnumber all the reasons why / So we keep smoking’ and we keep drinkin’ / Havin’ fun and never thinkin’ / Laughing at the price tag that we pay / And we keep roarin’ down the fast lane / Like two young men feelin’ no pain / And the reason for quittin’s / Getting bigger each day.”¹⁷ That song was roaring in my head, and I knew it was time—I just didn’t know time for what!

When the level of alcohol in your system is that high, you are truly hardly ever sober; honestly, you are never sober. Life is a grainy, hard-edged existence like an old, stark black-and-white photograph of a harsh winter scene. The fog in my brain never cleared; it was always there. It seemed as if there was a fleeting moment that followed the second drink of the day, usually around 6:30 in the morning, when the colors of life appeared to come into focus. That appearance of reality lasted only a brief time and then was replaced with the sameness of a thousand days before and left me with a stare of the same measurement.

¹⁷ Merle Haggard wrote the song “Reasons to Quit,” and recorded the duet with Willy Nelson in 1983, copyright Sony/ATV Tree Publishing.

The Flood of a Lifetime

I convinced a longtime friend to help me detox off vodka, off every form of alcohol. With reservation and consternation and after extracting empty promises from me, he agreed to detox me at home. He gathered the necessary tools, and the path was laid out—it was a path that led to somewhere between hell and Alice's Wonderland and somehow seemingly even further downhill from there. The next seventy-two to ninety-six hours were filled with deep pain, confusion, hallucinations, and more pain. What I saw and heard in those hours and days doesn't bear repeating; truthfully, most of it is beyond my penmanship to be able to share and even more so beyond my conscious ability to recall. What I do recall I don't care to try to repeat.

The fix was in; I was sober and I wanted to go to an AA meeting. That's just what I did—I went to Summit AA in Summit, Mississippi. I felt so good after the meeting that I went to the liquor store and destroyed everything that everyone had worked to help me with. "Here I am; I'm drunk again."¹⁸ "Drunk again" is both the most comforting feeling, back where you feel safe, and the most miserable straight-from-the-pit-of-hell place an alcoholic can be—you truly can be in two places at once. I had a deep desire, too deep to speak and too complicated to understand, to never visit this place again. I didn't know it, but my path was headed in the right direction. It would take a couple more jolts to bring me to my knees, and they were much closer than I realized.

Flash-forward to Memorial Day 2008. I was on my knees, hands cuffed behind my back, wearing shorts but no shirt, in the median of U.S. Highway 98. Blood was seeping from my left arm and shoulder where twice I had just been shot with a Taser gun. One of the arresting officers, Officer Gerry Crawford, said to me, "You used to be something. You were the hottest thing around here. Just look at you now. What happened to you? What have you done to yourself?"

What indeed had happened to me? I didn't have a clue at that moment. If I had been inclined to answer, I would have likely said something like, "I was just trying to make it through the day. I was just trying to have a good time." That would have been an accurate answer based on my blinded-eye vision of where my life was.

Today, five years sober, I only rarely think of taking a drink. Yet there is great danger in thinking that not drinking is sobriety. Not drinking is a component of sobriety, and obviously a very important

18 Moe Bandy, "Here I Am Drunk Again," 1976.

foundational component. I must go far beyond staying alcohol free; I have to make sure I don't find new and different ways to get high. Even as I have been writing over the last several days, I have been hearing a little warning bell about some of my daily activities. If I am seeking a good feeling based on my performance, I am setting myself up for a fall. There is nothing wrong with feeling good about ourselves, our activities, our thoughts. On the other hand, if the feelings are fueling my sobriety, then I am destined to get drunk in one way or another. I can't let my feelings about life be driven by how others are responding, by trusting in outside approval. That is more dangerous than a case of your favorite brew and a promise that no one will know but you!

Today, thanks to the process of putting these thoughts on paper and God's continued revelation of things to me, I see a much bigger picture. I don't suffer under the impression I have resolved this all and now know the answers to all of the questions. Truthfully, I not only don't know the answers to all the questions, I have yet to ascertain what all of the questions are. Yet, by the grace of God, I have some insight today into how my life had gotten so far, far offtrack.

AS LONG AS YOU ARE STILL
DRAWING BREATH, THERE IS NO
SUCH PLACE AS "A BRIDGE TOO FAR."
NEVER, EVER, EVER GIVE UP.

CHAPTER 32

NEW CHANNEL UNDER CONSTRUCTION

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.

The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.”

—2 Corinthians 5:17

THE TRIALS OF 1987 LED me back to God, and He reminded me that His mercies are fresh and new daily, that He has grace greater than all my sin. God works to accomplish His purposes in our lives—and it's all Him—yet we still have to do our part. It was the “our part” that I began to work on over the next several years.

Just as the dredging of a new river channel takes time and commitment, so a new direction in life requires a lot of focus and a firm direction. Not overnight, but over a lot of nights and a lot of days, God began to redirect my steps, to change my focus, and to help me learn how and why He works in my life. He was teaching me to begin to learn how to hear from Him and how to respond.

One of the main tools God used in my life (as He does in every life that is undergoing a serious dredging operation) was His Word. Over the next several years, I began to spend more and more time daily in the Bible. In fact, there came a point in time, around 1990, when I limited my intake of words solely to His Word. Just as the Army Corps of Engineers rerouted the Homochitto River many years ago, God began to use His Word to formulate new stream banks in my life, to revitalize the flow of God in my life, and to lead me to a fresh and new way of speaking, thinking, and living. The Bible, the Word of God, is not

about restrictions; it's a wonderful love letter from God laying out the channels He has put in place that give the greatest joy and protection for our lives and honor for His kingdom.

The other tool that took all of that to another level was prayer—listening to God and speaking with God. Prayer became a major part of my daily diet. I had some prayer partners, and we met daily, six days a week, very early in the morning, and for one to two hours we stayed on our knees before the Lord. You might think that sounds radical, but truthfully that is entry-level work for a life in transition. A river that has flooded for so long takes a lot of knee time. Time committed to prayer is time committed to a deeper, sweeter, more intimate walk with God. It's not just for recovering drunks; it's for all seeking to draw the real sustenance out of the river of life here on earth.

An amazing thing happened: The long season of recurring floods began to recede, and in its place there appeared new direction, a steady flow of God's presence and His work in my life/in our lives. People asked me to come and speak at their churches. I was asked to come to Roxie Church of God, and I remember seeing two old friends in attendance, Kenny and Missy Todd. I had not seen them in many years. The preacher told me the story of Missy asking him who was coming. She kept saying, "I must have misunderstood the name, Pastor. Tell me again who is coming." God was doing some really good work, as only He can do. But it was all Him. I had my part (we all have our part), but we must understand that in the end it's either all God or it's not of God at all!

Then another amazing, God-sized re-channelization work began to take place. The then-current sitting chancellor, Honorable R. B. Reeves, announced he would not seek re-election at the end of his term, which ended on December 31, 1994. Several people came to me and asked me about running for that position. In particular, a pastor, Mike Childs of Meadville United Methodist Church, told me God would have me run for that position. I kind of laughed him off, knowing what I knew about where I had been and the extreme scrutiny that would come to bear for a person seeking such a demanding and crucial judicial post.

My wife and I committed to pray about this new channel that was being suggested to us. We would have to move away from a successful law practice with my father, Mayes McGehee, and Jimmy Torrey. I also was aware the compensation for a state court judge was significantly less than the income I was currently enjoying (which I habitually

overspent). After about thirty days of prayer, we realized that God was calling me to seek the position, to trust Him with an effort that made no sense at all by any natural thinking. God was about to do another God thing in our lives.

I qualified to run and began campaigning for this very important judicial position, which had the responsibility of being the sole decision-maker for that court system across a four-county district. No one from my small home county of Franklin had ever been elected to that position; the chancellors always came from Pike County, which is four or five times the size of Franklin County. Further, two very experienced and well-known older (I was forty then) attorneys from McComb, Mississippi (a much larger town) had qualified to run.

We trusted God, and the election results were overwhelmingly in our favor. What's more, God granted me favor with the people in my home county (the very people who had front-row seats to all the flooding in my life) to an unheard-of extent. I carried about 90 percent of the vote in Franklin County and very high percentages in the other three counties as well. Let me say again, this was not about me; this was all about what God had done, was doing, and would do going forward. All Him; none of me!

²² The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; ²³ they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. (Lamentations 3:22-23)

WE LEARNED, BY ACTUAL EXPERIENCE, TO
TRUST IN THE LORD WITH ALL OUR HEART
AND HE CLEARLY DIRECTED OUR PATHS.

CHAPTER 33

THE PROCESS OF SOBRIETY

“Do not look at wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup and goes down smoothly. In the end it bites like a serpent and stings like an adder. Your eyes will see strange things, and your heart utter perverse things. You will be like one who lies down in the midst of the sea, like one who lies on the top of a mast. ‘They struck me,’ you will say, ‘but I was not hurt; they beat me, but I did not feel it. When shall I awake? I must have another drink.’”

—Proverbs 23:31-35

AUGUST 7, 2008, WAS NO different than a thousand drunken days before, just another day of waking up around four a.m., lighting a cigarette, and making a drink. The first two drinks were to steady and calm, just wake-up drinks, followed by a shower, a “cleansing” of yesterday’s “sin.” That is not what I called it at the time, but it was a hope that somehow I could start over—a new life with a little soap and water. The truth is, there isn’t enough soap or water in all the world to cleanse away the death grip of alcohol, but in my fractured mind it seemed like a cleansing that went deeper than the skin.

With my cleansing done and a sufficient store of both vodka and cigarettes, I was ready to face the day. I poured my first real drink and prepared to head down to river—my favorite place to enjoy early-morning drinks by myself: standing naked in the healing waters of the Homochitto, where the flowing waters seemed to provide a rebirth, a kind of daily revival of my spirit. This was my morning routine, and today was going to be like the day before.

The Bible says, “Every good gift . . . is from above” (James 1:17), and on this day I received a wonderful gift from God as He spoke into my spirit and said, “Your life is not going to end this way.” My routine was broken; today was not just another day. Instantly, I knew God had intervened and somehow I was going to pass from death to life. Oh how I wanted out; no matter what anyone says, at the level of their very soul, every alcoholic wants out. Yet, as clearly as I knew what I had just heard and that I was hearing from God, I also knew myself. In my strength that would never happen; I was too far gone. The cumulative nature of my problems was too great. I couldn’t live without the drink, I couldn’t not drink without the smokes, I couldn’t smoke without the drinks, I couldn’t possibly face my finances without being vodka high, I couldn’t be high without being drunk, and I could never face myself or life in general sober. So I thought, once again, like every morning of my life, I had to abandon my plan that formed each morning: “I am not going to live like this another day.” These plans never worked. This one wouldn’t work either, in my strength. But God! He invaded the depths of my soul and made real what seemed only an unattainable dream to me. I couldn’t, but God can and God did.

It’s now been almost ten years since August 7, 2008, and for reasons God alone can fully explain, this time it worked. It was “my time” because God made it my time. When I finished the first drink (which was in reality the third drink), I didn’t head to the river. I started making phone calls to treatment centers where people could help me. They weren’t too fired up because they remembered that I had done this back around Christmas a year or so before. I actually went that time but only stayed a short while, and it only served to fuel the fire—so I drank more, more often, more consistently than ever before. People never believe a drunk when he or she says, “I am going to get sober.” The drunk blows it and self-fulfills the prophecy of failure, time after time after nauseating time.

I found a treatment center that would take me, that would take me even if I continued to drink until I got there (that sealed the deal for me). Then I began the process of lining up a ride, finding someone who was willing to take me, who was willing to help. I found someone, and she worked for me! Always be willing to help a drunk or an addict who actively wants to pursue sobriety. I’m not saying we should throw away our life savings doing this, but we do need to be willing to help them at a level we are able. I was there for about sixty

days. I was scheduled to be there 120 days or longer. I broke out, literally, in the middle of the night. None of that sounds encouraging, but I gotten what I needed, my head was clear, I had a deep love for being sober and a deeper dread of dying drunk. I was ready to get ready to face the real world.

I attended Alcoholics Anonymous every day, ninety meetings in ninety days! Since then, I've been to countless meetings. I can find an AA meeting anywhere I go, no matter where in the world I am, and when I get there, people I have known all my life are there—people just like me, people who have a desire and a love for living sober and a deep, deep dread of dying drunk. Alcoholics Anonymous is a great fellowship; with their great help I learned to face life sober and, in God's perfect timing, to die sober.

The process of sobriety is daily. For me it is daily dying to myself and living for God. Now, I have not done this every one of the 3,464 days, but every day I didn't die to myself was a day I wasn't truly sober! No, I haven't drunk at all in that time period, but not drinking is not the only aspect of sobriety. Living sober includes dying to self every day. When I don't die to myself and live for God, I am "drinking" in my mind—that is, living selfishly. The process of sobriety is to know I am here on purpose, and my purpose is to love and serve God and to love and serve people. I cannot achieve my life purpose of living unless I first die to myself.

I recognize and cling to the scriptural truth in this verse as I daily die to myself and live for God: "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20). Jesus Christ, the Way to God, is the only ultimate Truth in the midst of life's lies, and the Life in the midst of a dying world.

The problems of life don't pause or go away while you are seeking to learn to live sober. The challenges continue without letup, and we have to learn to deal with them. A key, maybe *the* key, to living sober is to learn to have an honest conversation with yourself. Living the alcoholic life is living with constant lies to ourselves about what and how and why we are living the way we are. The road to sobriety is a road that requires honesty with ourselves (and others), and we do that by talking to ourselves and always telling ourselves the truth, especially when it hurts.

⁵ Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? (Psalm 42:5, NIV⁸⁴)

This particular Scripture was opened up to me by Jim Cymbala of Brooklyn Tabernacle Church on a trip to New York City in May 2013. He proposed that not only *can* we talk to ourselves but rather we *must* talk to ourselves. He took his reference from Psalms 42 and 43 of the Holy Bible. The process of talking to myself had long existed with me. It was this process that I believe God used to lead me to sobriety, for real and for life. We all are battling with thoughts, feelings, and seeds planted by others, seeds of all kinds. The question that must be asked, the issue that must be confronted, is this: "What do we do with all that stuff that is running rampant in our minds?"

The issues I struggle with didn't begin with me. The issues I struggle with are as old as man and as fresh as today. The issue is not the issue; the issue is finding an answer to the stuff that runs constantly in our minds. That's what was going on with David. He couldn't figure out why he was having certain struggles, so he asked himself this question: "Why are you downcast, O my soul?" (Psalm 42:5, NIV⁸⁴). David was confronting the stuff running around in his head. God designed the Bible to provide us with truth, and one of those great truths is revealed in this simple question David asked himself multiple times. Why in the world do I feel like this? Why am I thinking the thoughts in my mind right now?

David confronted his own thought processes with truth, with God. He followed the question he posed to himself with this truth: "Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God" (Psalm 42:5, NIV⁸⁴). The way to emerge from the lies that are our feelings, our wrong thoughts, and thoughts placed by others is to confront those lies with truth, with the Ultimate Truth—Jesus!

I had to confront the lies about my place in the world, the world's place in me, and the reality of daily life and the lie that I could escape the reality of life with a substance. The truth is: God is real. God made me. God loves me. God has a plan for me. God's plan is to bless me in the way He knows is real and right and eternal. God will never leave me. God will never abandon me. God is the same yesterday, today, and forever. No matter what the world is saying to me or about me, no matter what I am thinking about myself or saying to myself, the reality is that God has made me to be in relationship to Him—and that is through Jesus and Him alone.

If I am to survive, I have to talk to myself. I have to speak truth. I have to speak God's presence to myself. If I am to survive, I have to talk to myself.

Getting sober is important; staying sober is the difference between life and death, between hell on earth and living a decent life, regardless of the circumstances. To get sober, you have to be willing to face yourself and fight through the pain and the deep anxiety that don't want to let you believe you can live a moment without a drink. To stay sober, you have to deal with the fact that you can never drink again. The way you do that is by talking to yourself—honestly, bluntly, and continually. The main word one has to speak is this: "I can do this today, I can do this for an hour, I can do this for the moment I am living in. That's all I have to do—stay sober in this very moment, nothing more but definitely nothing less."

¹ My soul finds rest in God alone; my salvation comes from him.
(Psalm 62:1, NIV⁸⁴)

A CONVERSATION WE MUST ALL HAVE
WITH OURSELVES IS SIMPLY THIS:
GOD PUT ME HERE FOR A PURPOSE—I
NEED TO FIND MY PURPOSE AND LIVE
IN IT. GETTING AND STAYING HIGH
ISN'T GOD'S PURPOSE FOR MY LIFE.

CHAPTER 34

GOD MOVES IN MYSTERIOUS WAYS

(*BUT GOD!*)

"But God led the people around by the way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea. And the people of Israel went up out of the land of Egypt equipped for battle."

—Exodus 13:18

God promised Abraham that He would make him into a great nation and give his people the Promised Land. Abraham's offspring, the Israelites, were held captive in Egypt for more than four hundred years. But God intervened and led them out by a most unusual route—right through the middle of the Red Sea—and they walked through on dry ground.

Through no one's fault but my own, I too was in bondage—to alcohol. I was being "held in a far country" too, but God led me out. In the process of leading me out, we made a move to McComb, Mississippi, to an old home in the historic district of the city—perfect for Prudence. My thought was this move was for her, and the house was intended to be a gift of love to her that would help effect healing for both of us. But God had plans I never imagined, and the move was likewise right on time for me as well.

In McComb, God opened doors for me to plant a church that gave birth to a new Alcoholics Anonymous group and meeting, a feeding ministry, a clothing ministry, a jail ministry, and a medical ministry. These ministries in McComb were used by God to touch many lives and help many people get sober, stay sober, get saved, feed the hungry, heal the sick, visit and minister to people in jail . . . the end of what God accomplished there has yet to be seen. I had to go to

“Egypt” in order to be delivered out of there and led back to a place of healing for me and many others.

Cornerstone Church and the AA group that used the same facility both moved forward in positive ways; you might say they “flourished” in the sense that lives were being touched and hearts were being changed. At Cornerstone Church, we saw broken people walk in and become new creatures in Christ. We saw many positive and encouraging life changes take place. Without addressing specifics and obviously not addressing persons, the Cornerstone AA group was likewise quite productive. Over the next several years, both the church and the recovery group became a hub of activities, meeting the spiritual, emotional, and physical needs of many in the community.

Cornerstone Church became a multicultural melting pot of people where the Word of God was spoken plainly, hearts were being touched spiritually, and practical physical needs were being met. Cornerstone’s ministries branched into feeding people at a weekly soup kitchen, offering a free medical clinic, and serving as a base for Celebrate Recovery for people on the street and for people housed in the Pike County Jail. In addition, through the hard work of various people in the church, a clothing ministry was begun and successfully carried out over a period of several years.

In my mind—and I pray in reality—the birth and carrying on of these ministries and offshoots were a reminder to me of God’s promise that “in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28). The mistakes I had made, as large as they were, were turned around by God to be used to touch a great number of lives through Cornerstone Church and the Cornerstone AA group. It is the grace of God alone that accomplished this, but God does use His people, even when they are pulling back. I thank God for His grace; I can truly say, “His grace still amazes me.”

I was crossing the street toward Cornerstone in downtown McComb when one of Pike County’s elected officials stopped me for a chat. We talked a few minutes as he inquired into some of the activities of Cornerstone and the other things I was involved in. As he was about to walk off, he said, “Lawyer, Judge, Pastor, and Community Activist, you have a wide sphere of influence.” My response was “Don’t forget Drunk” to add to that description—that’s me, a “sober drunk” by the grace of God.

God Moves in Mysterious Ways

God called me back to the pulpit at Ebenezer—the very place I stepped down from because of alcohol. When I got this call, I said, “Surely you do not want me because everyone will ridicule you for having a drunk for a preacher.” They said, “We are following God’s lead, and you should to.” God did some really good things at Ebenezer over the next four years—but it all followed my fall from the Promised Land back into the bondage of Egypt. In the words of author Mark Batterson, “You can’t never always sometimes tell what God is about to do.”¹⁹

WE MUST ALWAYS BE READY AND
WILLING TO LET GOD REDIRECT OUR
PATHS, OUR LIVES. WE HAVEN’T YET
SEEN WHO WE SHALL BE, AND GOD
HAS PLANS AND RESOURCES WE
HAVE NEVER EVEN THOUGHT OF.

¹⁹ Mark Batterson, *The Circle Maker* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011).

WAYPOINT #5:

As WE SOW, SO SHALL WE REAP

⁷Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap.

—Galatians 6:7

FOR MANY YEARS I HAD sown seeds that were destructive of my marriage covenant. In 2013, my crop failed and so did my marriage. Let me be clear: marriages do not fail; people fail at marriage. This is not a book on marriage, and that is a good thing because it is a subject I have failed at two times. The marriage covenant is dear to God because marriage is created by God and because it represents the Gospel.

²² Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. ²³ For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. ²⁴ Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. ²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶ that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, ²⁷ so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. ²⁸ In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹ For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, ³⁰ because we are members of his body. ³¹ “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.”

As We Sow, So Shall We Reap

³² This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. ³³ However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband. (Ephesians 5:22-33)

Christ never ever lets us down, and this is one of the reasons God is so vigilant and protective of the marriage covenant. This is also why people failing at marriage has so profoundly impacted our world. The marriage relationship is foundational to the human fabric and the spiritual fabric of our world. I have no deeper regret than my failure to uphold the marriage covenant, and so ended thirty-six years of marriage to Prudence.

CHAPTER 35

YOU CAN'T GET HERE FROM THERE

*"Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book
were written, every one of them, the days that were formed
for me, when as yet there was none of them."*

—Psalm 139:16

THE DISTANCE FROM THE EARTH to the sun is estimated to be approximately 92,955,807 miles. Allowing a reasonable margin for error, that's still a very long way. But as far as the earth is from the sun, the distance between where I had been and where I found myself on Sunday, November 24, 2013—compared to August 7, 2008—seemed even farther than the distance between the earth and the sun. On that late November day, I was speaking to a joint service of several Methodist churches in my new home area of George County, Mississippi. I was asked to give my testimony, to tell where I have been and where I am today. My best efforts at explaining my story to the good people in that service were woefully inadequate at best. I think they must have looked at me as one who might have recently dropped to Earth from that faraway star we call the sun! They looked at me blankly as I tried to explain how this apparently sane and fully dressed man standing before them was, just a couple of years earlier, deeply and totally lost in a fog of alcohol and a self-absorbed world beyond sight and sound.

George County is home to me today²⁰; it's where my two churches lay—Antioch, slightly north, and Pine Grove, south—near the church

20 This was as of the day of the original writing of this story in late 2013.

parsonage on a quiet and scenic state highway not far inland from the Mississippi Gulf Coast. On this cool, blustery November evening, my twenty-eight-month-old granddaughter Kylee McGehee and I had driven over from the parsonage to Pleasant Hill United Methodist Church. We were there for me to share my story, and I guess Kylee was there only because at her age, life doesn't come with too many choices. For Kylee, choosing to be with "Poppa" (as I am known to her) is a matter of joyful necessity.

How had I made the immeasurable trip from death to life, from deep alcoholism to a stable, focused life? How does that happen? The truth is it doesn't happen—He happens. It was only God's grace and divine and miraculous hand that brought me from a life built around a drinking plan to a life where someone might possibly be interested in knowing about how I had made the trip to this new land.

The bishop and the cabinet of the Mississippi Conference of the United Methodist Church had assigned me to serve Antioch and Pine Grove United Methodist Churches, which shared a pastor, and is known as the Mentorum Charge in George/Jackson Counties, Mississippi.²¹ I never asked my new church family if they had advance warning of the baggage their pastor was bringing with him. I arrived on a motorcycle on the afternoon of June 18, 2013, and when I turned off Mississippi Highway 57 into the parsonage driveway, the first few bars of "Amazing Grace" came blaring from the speakers of my bike. It seemed to be a sign of God's presence and His continued extreme graciousness in my life.

When I met with the leaders of the two churches in what is known as a covenant meeting, I broke the news to them. I told them I was an alcoholic in recovery, I was about to be divorced, my family had not come with me, and I had experienced significant health issues over the last several years. In short, I warned them they were getting damaged goods, but they should be encouraged; surely the bottom of the barrel had already been fully explored, and brighter days must lie ahead. The level and sweetness of grace and mercy extended to me through these wonderful newly discovered brothers and sisters of the faith surprised even me.

George County is divided, in more ways than one, by the dark clear waters of the Pascagoula River, known for many years as the

21 Antioch UMC is in George County, and Pine Grove UMC is in Jackson County.

“Singing River.” This storied river is flanked by the Pascagoula River Swamp, a myriad of small lakes, ponds, cypress swamps, and sloughs. In addition to the Singing River, our small-in-stature, large-in-love churches are bordered by two wildly beautiful creeks, Red Creek and Black Creek. When I look out the front window of my house, I see a setting suitable for a postcard, which is the farm and fields of Albert and Marie Reeves, two of the congregants I now have the opportunity to serve. God doesn’t do anything in part; He has truly blessed me with a healing of body, soul, and spirit and placed me in a veritable garden. In fact, the area is widely known for producing watermelons, vegetables, and nursery plants of the highest quality.

In a relatively short time God brought about a transformation that is God sized and surprises none more than me. From the deepest of darkness, God has taken me from not walking to running, races even. He has restored me from being handcuffed to the bench in the jail to being free to come and go as I minister to others who are not enjoying such liberties. I have moved from standing in front of the bench to sitting upon it once again. In fact, today I am dispatched around the state regularly and extensively in service of the Supreme Court when other judges aren’t able to hear cases due to health or recusal. In fact, one justice of the Mississippi Supreme Court said (upon our being introduced), “I know who you are—you are the judge we appoint when no one else will do.” Whether that is accurate or not, the change from being handcuffed and tased to being one of the go-to people the Supreme Court looks to in difficult matters is a job only God can accomplish.

In speaking to this Sunday evening gathering, I am seeking to push myself—and them—to see the urgency of God’s call on our lives. God has not saved us to a place of some small comfort—no! As Karl Barth has said, “To be saved does not mean to be a little encouraged, a little comforted, a little relieved. It means to be pulled like a log from a burning fire.” Today, I want to live my life and approach service with a sense of urgency and an awareness of God’s call upon us all to live radically different lives from those around us. I am not speaking of those “in the world”; I mean radically different from what some have called “the Christian version of the American dream”—the modern-day church. In short, God has called me and all whom He has pulled like a log from a burning fire to live as He

You Can't Get Here from There

wants us to live, to go where He wants us to go, to speak and yield and give ourselves in a way that is radically different from the American dream version of Christianity—to so posture ourselves that we can be spent in service to God.

THANKS BE TO GOD THAT WE ARE
NOT LIMITED TO OUR SHORTSIGHTED
VIEW OF OUR LIVES AND HOW WE
FIT INTO THE WORLD AROUND US.
GOD HAS PLANS OF WHICH WE KNOW
NOTHING. THANKS BE TO HIM.

WAYPOINT #6:

I HAVE MET THE ENEMY, AND IT IS ME

THE GOAL OF THIS WRITING has been clearly stated, but another side to that coin is that I want to do no harm to any other person. I met and married a wonderful and charming Christian woman from another state. But I failed again. She would say that “the enemy won” in the failure of our marriage. That is a true statement, but we know ultimately God prevails in spite of all enemies and in spite of my repeated failures. We fall, but God stands eternally strong.

There is nothing to be gained by detailing the failure of my second marriage. It is simply this: I failed my marriage covenant by participating in divorce again. Words beyond that would be seeking to justify that which is not justifiable. I would add that my goal here is to examine and evaluate my behavior, and I find it to be seriously lacking. I do not look to anyone else; it is my own failure that I see.

A few days ago I had to go to McComb for a doctor’s appointment. I drove by my old house where Prudence still lives, a fine old home in the historic downtown area. There is still a very real and deep pain from the loss of my family unit. I wondered, “Why can’t I still be in the middle of family gatherings?” I drove on to my appointment, and the answer to my question came to me very plainly: “You cannot be a part of the family gatherings anymore because you broke the family unit. You made decisions to put your wants and your desires ahead of your commitments and your vows. You caused a pain so deep that even though she can and has forgiven you, her heart cannot let you back in. It has developed a self-protective coating that has plenty of room for forgiveness, but the hurt is too deep to be healed by apologies. That is

I Have Met the Enemy, and It Is Me

why you can't get back in. You can make your own choices, but your choices always come with consequences."

I will live the rest of my life with the consequences of two failed marriages; worse even is that all of my family, my friends, and those in my sphere of influence live with and are affected by the consequences of my wrong choices. Far worse, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is impacted by the total failure I made in each of these marriages.

WAYPOINT #7:

MOVING FROM LOOKING INWARD TO LOOKING UPWARD

I HAVE CONCLUDED MY SELECTED overview of the circumstances that led me from December 1953 to about April 2016. The circumstances given are limited; obviously much more could be added. However, these vignettes are representative of the overall time and circumstances addressed.

Where do we go from here?

The goal was to answer these questions: How did I get here? Why? Where do I go from here? What is my purpose? How do I help others avoid some of the pitfalls I encountered through my own poor choices?

To answer those questions, I have been looking inwardly, but to really understand myself, I must next look up. I first have to get a clear understanding of who God is—as much as that can be done of the one and only God who is far beyond our understanding. But God has revealed Himself in His Word, and we can know all we need to know of Him and much more as we look at God as He reveals Himself in His Word. The information in Part Two is copied with permission from a previous work, *Follow Him in All Things*, also written by me.

PART TWO

WHO GOD IS AS HE REVEALS HIMSELF IN SCRIPTURE²²

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A River to Cross

CHAPTER 36

KNOWING AND TRUSTING GOD

WHAT IS YOUR FIRST THOUGHT in the morning? We must think right things because it frames the day—if you begin a journey in the right place, you will always reach your destination. If we start at the wrong place, we never get where we were supposed to go, and we can stop anywhere and it doesn’t matter because when you start wrong, where you wind up doesn’t even matter.

God has graciously given me the awareness of thinking about who He is as my first thought most mornings. The second thing I do is take a hymnal from my bedside table and sing of the worth and honor and glory due to God and the blessings of trusting in Him. This was not always the case; I cannot count the mornings my first move was to light a cigarette before my eyes even opened. Today, I light up my heart with the glorious reminders of who God is, what He is doing, and what He will do. When you begin with God and the truth of who He is, your day is framed in a way that cannot fail.

Knowing God is perfect in all of His ways is the most important thing knowable! It is vitally important for us to think right things about God and come to know Him for who He really is, perfect in all of His ways. Knowing God for who He really is will transform our lives and lead us to fully trust Him; knowing and trusting God is key to loving and following Him.

The more we know and trust God, the better we worship and serve God with growing intimacy and focus. Our worship of God is key to encountering the Person of God. Encountering, loving, and worshiping the Person of God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) is our reason for existence. God does not need us, but we desperately need Him!

Being in a loving, worshipful relationship with Him and loving His people are the reasons for our existence—it is for those very purposes He created us.

When we begin to think right thoughts about who God is, we will, by His grace, begin to live right lives in the light of God's holiness and perfection. Having a proper view of God opens the doorway to a proper view of ourselves. When we see God for who He is and see ourselves in the light of Him, one of two things happen: (a) we become disheartened and turn back to being a little religious, satisfied with living a lukewarm existence, going back to the way "we have always done things"; or (b) we begin to seriously seek after the "crucified life,"²³ where Christ is everything, where we truly know we are His, we belong to Him, and nothing else matters. We live abandoned to Jesus Christ.

The very moment we die to self is the moment we truly begin to live—living the abundant life Christ died to give us! This is not something that happens one day and we are "through." The Apostle Paul, after knowing and serving Jesus Christ for many years through many devastating challenges, said, "And this, so that I may know Him [experientially, becoming more thoroughly acquainted with Him, understanding the remarkable wonders of His Person more completely] and [in that same way experience] the power of His resurrection [which overflows and is active in believers], and [that I may share] the fellowship of His sufferings, by being continually transformed [inwardly into His likeness even] to His death [dying as He did]" (Philippians 3:10, AMP).

In my seventh decade of life, I have finally begun to see God for who He is. The more I see of God, the more I want to know Him! The journey to a deeper knowledge of God is just beginning for me; the more I know Him, the more I love Him; and the more I love Him, the more I want to know Him. He is beginning to become in my thoughts what He has always been: everything!

Coming to know God for who He really is radically changes the dynamics of our daily lives. When we know that the very God who created everything is personally with each one of us, loves us, and has promised never to leave us—nothing could possibly be sweeter,

²³ Galatians 2:20 says, "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

nothing could be more important. There is no greater thing than knowing God!

³¹What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³²He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? (Romans 8:31-32)

Life is a great joy today because I know who God is and who I am in Christ. I have discovered my purpose in life, and I have set my sights on the one true destination of a life that counts, Christ Himself—more of Him, less of me!

Why has it taken me so long to learn the ultimate importance of knowing Jesus? I do not know the answer to the question, but because God is perfect in all of His ways, I do not lament that I am learning these truths late. However, I do encourage you to grasp the fullness of God as early as possible. There were many years I wandered with little or no purpose. Rather than getting bogged down in the why of God's timing (I think the enemy would love for me to cry over those lost years), my focus is rejoicing in what God is teaching me now as I seek a deeper walk with Christ. After all, God is in control, and His timing, like everything else about Him, is perfect in every way. God is revealing Himself to me at the perfect time according to His great plan. It is my fervent prayer that He will use this book to help you and me in our pursuit of God.

Knowing God leads to trusting God. Trusting God in all circumstances is one of God's most important and beautiful gifts. When we know God loves us and His purpose in all things is for our good, we begin to fully experience true peace, joy, and contentment. We cease to agonize over why things happen the way they do; we look to God instead of our circumstances. Knowing God, not man, is ultimately in charge helps us to develop an unoffendable heart. Someone else may have intended harm for us, but God will work it for our good so we refuse to get angry and can even give thanks in all circumstances. God is growing us up in Him.

²Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds,³for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.⁴And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. (James 1:2-4)

Each of us experiences challenges every day. God uses life's challenges to shape and mold us into the people He created us to be.

Knowing, trusting, and following God day by day leads to a transformation²⁴ from the “old you” to revealing Christ in you. The most radical procedure in our makeover involves self/pride. Self (selfish, self-centered, me, my, mine) is the greatest sin that must be removed from and conquered within each of us; it is a form of spiritual pride (the opposite of being “poor in spirit,” Matthew 5:3). Spiritual pride is any sense that we are good enough to save ourselves or even to contribute the least bit to our place in God through Christ. Pride is every thought and attitude that adopts or incorporates any such “self” thought; pride is not from God.

God has to trim away all thoughts of pride, self-sufficiency, and self-adequacy from us to show us our complete dependence upon Him. This cutting away of pride is a lifelong process. It is a form of pruning; it is never easy or pleasant at the moment, but it is always productive if we trust God in the process. My experience has been that it happens like this: “Lord, this hurts and I don’t know what You are doing, but I do know You love me and You want what is best for me. Lord, I trust You.” This is the same deep trust Jesus expressed to the Father when He said, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done” (Luke 22:42).

Jesus Christ is our example in all things.

The storms that blow into our lives are used by God to reveal the deeper truth of who God is and who we are. How we respond to the storms or tests in life has a great impact on the course of our lives.

³⁵ On that day, when evening had come, [Jesus] said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.” ³⁶ And leaving the crowd, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. And other boats were with him. ³⁷ And a great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat, so that the boat was already filling. ³⁸ But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion. And they woke him and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” ³⁹ And he awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. ⁴⁰ He said to them, “Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?” ⁴¹ And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?” (Mark 4:35-41)

²⁴ It is an absolute spiritual reality (see 2 Corinthians 5:17) that when we are saved, we are transformed. The experiencing of those changes is worked out daily in our lives for the rest of our lives.

The disciples went from a time of great doubting to a deeper knowledge of God. They went from fear and trembling in the face of the storm to reverential fear and honor for the Master of the sea. Charles Swindoll has said, “I am convinced that life is 10 percent what happens to me and 90 percent of how I react to it.” How we respond is determined by our view of God, and we have to get the right view of God—that is my heart’s burning desire for you and for me.

I have to acknowledge here that much of my life has consisted of a very self-centered, selfish, and self-destructive path that has wounded myself and many others. The pain of my failures is still deeply felt by me and those impacted. I must and do accept full responsibility for my failures and the resulting harm. However, it is not the failures that I wish to emphasize but rather the work of God’s grace in my life.

My report is “God loves you, He has a plan for your life, His plan is through the finished work of the Savior Jesus Christ. He has called us into a deep love relationship with Him. The right relationship with God is one where we progressively grow in our knowledge of and our love for Him. Knowing God leads to trusting God. Trusting God allows life’s challenges to shape us into who He wants us to be. With God, the closer we get, the better He looks. We are all sinners, and we all fail. No one will ever be right with God by his or her efforts or actions. Jesus died in our place that we might live through Him, living fully surrendered to God where our daily goal is to die to ourselves and take up our cross and follow Jesus.”²⁵

I pray that sharing some of my own failures will hopefully help you avoid some of my poor choices and accept your own failures as a means for God to shape you into the person He intends you to be. May we each move forward to living the full Christ-centered life God has set before us.

We can see many examples in Scripture where God used a person’s failures to actually help them grow and mature spiritually. I have found that God uses our failures to teach us the ultimate lesson of trusting Him. The clearest statement we have on trusting God is this powerful command and promise: “Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths” (Proverbs 3:5-6).

²⁵ Let me be clear. I deeply regret my failures. My failures came from my sinful choices. God hates sin. The point is, in spite of and in the midst of my failures, God is at work to accomplish His plan.

Trusting in the Lord with all our heart means we learn to do things His way, which is always, without exception, the right and better way. Knowing and trusting God will radically change how we respond to every mountain and molehill we encounter in life. God uses the events of life to mold us into the people He put us here to be. However, this only happens as we start to know and understand God for who He really is.

Fully trusting God is a major challenge; the largest part of the trusting God challenge is “me.” The reason is clear: I am holding out hope that there is some good in me and that I will be able to help God make me better, to help with my salvation. This thought must fully die. “Self” anything (self-righteous, self-centered, self-absorbed, selfish) must die. I have to know that life is one thing: Jesus! It is not and cannot ever be “Jesus plus I did . . .” Today, I know “I dare not trust the sweetest frame but wholly lean on Jesus’ name.”

We might imagine the picture of Christ’s finished work in this way: We are standing in line to pay for our purchases. Jesus takes our place and pays our bill in full. Jesus is disgraced when we, knowing He has paid the bill in full, continue to stand in line and try to pay a bill He has already paid. He wants us to accept Him and His finished work, and we do that by knowing, trusting, and resting in Him—taking our eyes off ourselves and looking unto Him fully and finally!

My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less²⁶

*My hope is built on nothing less
than Jesus' blood and righteousness.
I dare not trust the sweetest frame,
but wholly lean on Jesus' name.*

REFRAIN

*On Christ the solid rock I stand,
all other ground is sinking sand;
all other ground is sinking sand.*

*When Darkness veils His lovely face,
I rest on His unchanging grace.
In every high and stormy gale,
my anchor holds within the veil.*

26 “My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less,” Edward Mote, 1834.

REFRAIN

*His oath, His covenant, His blood
support me in the whelming flood.
When all around my soul gives way,
He then is all my hope and stay*

REFRAIN

*When He shall come with trumpet sound,
O may I then in Him be found!
Dressed in His righteousness alone,
faultless to stand before the throne!*

REFRAIN

†

Prayer to know and trust God more each day:

Heavenly Father, Almighty God, help us to know You are a good, good Father and You are perfect in all of your ways. Help us to know we can and must trust You completely, leaning fully on You and trusting in You with all of our hearts. Lord, help us to know we can do nothing without You; we can't even draw a breath except that You have given it to us. Help each of us to build our lives on the reality of who You are. Lord, we want to know You as fully as we can; help us to lay aside any thoughts we have except the truth of who You reveal Yourself to be in Your Word, knowing that whatever happens in our lives, we can and absolutely must rest and trust wholly in You. We pray this in Jesus' holy and precious name. Amen.

CHAPTER 37

GOD REVEALS HIMSELF

LIVING FULLY FOR GOD, BEING abandoned to God can start to happen as we begin to see God as He really is. We will never, on this earth, know all of God; if we could know all of God, He would not be God. Yet God reveals to us all we need to know in order to trust, love, worship, and serve Him here. We are not there yet, but we need to seek Him more and more every day. We also have to acknowledge that knowing God is both a daily and a lifelong process. Either we are seeking more of God or we are falling away from Him.

Paul, who wrote the majority of the New Testament, acknowledged he was not there yet: “And this, so that I may know Him [experientially, becoming more thoroughly acquainted with Him, understanding the remarkable wonders of His Person more completely] and [in that same way experience] the power of His resurrection [which overflows and is active in believers], and [that I may share] the fellowship of His sufferings, by being continually transformed [inwardly into His likeness even] to His death [dying as He did]” (Philippians 3:10, AMP).

And so we must know, like Paul, we have not arrived at full knowledge of God. May we seek to know God with the same zeal Paul had. God Himself alive and present in Paul’s words fires me up to seek after Him!

Our relationship with God is personal; He reveals Himself to each of us individually. We certainly can learn from others who are ahead of us, but to really encounter and come to know God deeper, we must have a personal encounter with God Himself. God wants a personal encounter with you and me. He will reveal Himself to us more and more as we seek Him in Scripture, in prayer, and in worship.

Corporate worship and Christ-centered sermons and teachings are tools God uses to draw us closer, but our personal encounter with God is the key to growing in our knowledge of God. Once we catch the beauty and reality of this personal experience and knowledge of Him, nothing else can compare with Him; nothing else will satisfy. God's presence with each of us exceeds anything else we will ever experience in this life.

The Holy Bible is God's primary means of revealing Himself to us. We sometimes struggle getting into this book. The problem is that we do not have right thoughts about what the Bible is. The Bible should not be thought of as a book in the normal sense we think of that word. The Bible is alive, and it is God revealing Himself to us. Reading the Bible under the direction of the Holy Spirit is an immediate and real encounter with the Creator of this world. In His Word, God personally and intimately reveals Himself to us, and we begin to personally experience and enjoy His real, joyful, loving, and wise presence in our lives. Scripture is God speaking to us personally at this very moment. God's revelation of Himself is progressive; the more we go to Him, the more He reveals. The more He reveals, the more we love Him. The more we love Him, the more we want to know Him.

The Bible is also a call from God to each of us. He says, "Come to Me through Christ Jesus and live the rest of your life in a personal love relationship with Me." The Bible reveals that God Himself is the initiator of the love and the relationship. We don't have to seek Him; He has been seeking us all along. When we begin to understand the fullness of God's love and call on each of us, life rockets to a whole new level experienced nowhere else nor in anyone else other than the person of God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Knowing God is a lifelong process, but we start that "journey of a thousand miles" with our first step of seeking to know God as He really is in Scripture, prayer, a personal love relationship, and corporate worship as well as other ways.

God is "our Father," and like an earthly father, He wants His children to know Him and love Him. In other words, He is waiting with great love and anticipation for us to respond to His invitation to know and love Him more and more. Like a child seeking to take his first steps, may we move toward Him now by opening His Holy Bible and simply asking God to show Himself to us; He is waiting, and nothing would be more pleasing than for His children to say, "Abba Father, I want to know You better; show Yourself to me."

Jesus asked Peter a simple but penetrating question; it is a question we all must answer: "But who do you say that I am?"

¹⁶ Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." ¹⁷ And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 16:16-17)

God revealed Himself to Peter, and He will reveal Himself to us as we seek Him. We have to make knowing God the priority in our lives, wanting God in the same way we want our next breath. David lived in a place where water was precious, and every living creature longs for water. David expressed his longing for God like this: "As the deer longs for streams of water, so I long for you, O God. I thirst for God, the living God. When can I go and stand before him?" (Psalm 42:1-2, NLT).

We looked at Paul earlier when he was seeking God just as David is here. Paul in effect said to God, "Nothing else matters, Lord. I just want to know You." He said, "I want to know Christ, and by knowing Him to know that there is no righteousness in me." Paul was growing in his knowledge of God, and a significant revelation to him was that nothing we have—no title, no possession, no accolade—amounts to anything before God.

Paul showed us how God progressively reveals Himself to us: "that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead" (Philippians 3:10-11). Paul was saying in essence, "I want to know Jesus and become like Him in every way, even in suffering." Paul went on to show us that growing in our knowledge of God should never end. We should seek to know Him more and more every day.

¹² Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³ Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:12-14)

This is the picture or model we must follow: pressing on to know God more and more. God has called us to Him, and we need to be consumed with the call of God upon our lives.

God is the consuming passion in my life today. I want to know Him! I am not there yet, but I am, by God's amazing grace, on the road to

God Reveals Himself

knowing Him better. This is my prayer for each of us, that we be infected with the burning desire to know Jesus, to want and long for Him as we desperately seek after a drop of water in a time of great thirst. As the deer pants for the water, so our souls long after You, O God!



Prayer to know God more and more as He reveals Himself:

God, help us each to know You love us and want a deeper love relationship with us. You want us to know You as much as we can as we are led deeper and deeper into relationship with You by our Guide, the Holy Spirit. Lord, give us a growing desire to know You more intimately and more fully and to seek this relationship with You in Your Word, in prayer, and in our experience of You personally and with other Christians. Lord, help us to know You. We pray this in the matchless name of Jesus. Amen.

CHAPTER 38

KNOWING GOD REVEALS OUR PURPOSE IN LIFE

A GOOD FRIEND I HOLD in high regard recently told me his current job was one of the boxes he wanted to check off in his life. He went on to tell me about the other boxes he hoped to yet check off. I thought to myself, “This guy has lived his whole life with a plan and a purpose.” I think it was that day (not very long ago) that I said to myself, “You love the Lord and you want to be of use to Him, but you are not being intentional in living every day on purpose.” I made up my mind right then to become more purposeful and more focused on how God would have me to live, what His purposes are for my life, where and how He wants me to serve and glorify Him!²⁷

As we seek to know God through His Word, prayer, and worship, He honors our efforts by revealing Himself to us. He also shows us a true picture of who we are. Seeing the holiness of God reveals my complete poverty and my desperate need for God. God does not need me, but I (and each of us) desperately need God. This lesson is one demonstrated very powerfully when Jesus confronted religious people in His day who thought they had it all together.

¹⁵ And as he reclined at table in his house, many tax collectors and sinners were reclining with Jesus and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. ¹⁶ And the scribes of the Pharisees, when they

27 While working on this book, I sensed God wanted me to step down from my job as a senior status judge in the state of Mississippi. Many people have asked, “What are you going to do next?” My answer is simply, “I am trusting God to direct my paths; He will show me at the right time. Right now my job is to trust and obey.”

saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, said to his disciples, “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?”¹⁷ And when Jesus heard it, he said to them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.” (Mark 2:15-17)

This story shows us we are all in one of two groups: those who know they need a doctor or those who foolishly think they do not. Lord, thank You for showing us who we really are and our deep need for You.

The more we know God and know ourselves, the clearer we see our life purpose. Knowing God shows us we are each here for a reason; every life has a definite purpose and meaning. I confess I missed this for much of my life; I simply did what was in front of me. Living life without a growing awareness of our purpose leads to a great waste of time and resources. God put each one of us right where we are at this exact time for very specific purposes.

Our ultimate purpose is to love and honor God. He put us here to be in a personal, dynamic love relationship with Him! He wants us to center our lives in Him, loving and serving Him in every way, in all we are and with all we have. This will strike some as extreme selfishness by God; if you know Him, you know this is a great blessing. There is no greater joy than knowing and loving God. Now we see why—it is the very reason for our existence. When a person finds their purpose, they experience completion and it is the source of deep and abiding joy and peace.

One of my heroes, A. W. Tozer, a man of no formal education who lived and died a simple but very driven and intensely focused man, said our purpose is “that we might worship God and enjoy him forever.”²⁸

Here are a few excerpts from the Word of God regarding the purpose of life for every one of us:

¹³The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. (Ecclesiastes 12:13)

³¹So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. (1 Corinthians 10:31)

¹I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God,

28 A. W. Tozer, *The Worship-Driven Life*, James L. Snyder, ed. (Oxford: Monarch Books, 2008), 10.

which is your spiritual worship.² Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12:1-2)

God says it is our duty to fear God (honor and worship Him as God), to lovingly obey His commandments (love God and our neighbors as ourselves), to do every single thing we do for the glory of God, and to offer our very lives in full surrender to God. *God is our purpose!* We are here to honor and obey God.

Brother Lawrence (Nicolas Herman, a Catholic monk who lived in the 1600s in Paris) was a dishwasher for many years in a Paris monastery. Brother Lawrence said he washed his dishes for the glory of God. He said, “I would not even take up a piece of straw from the ground if I thought he didn’t want me to but would run to pick it up out of love for him if that is what he wanted.”²⁹ When you read Brother Lawrence’s life story and the joy he experienced daily in God’s presence, you know this simple man got what so many have sought for so long in so many wrong ways. I am one of those who was, in the words of a song, “looking for love in all the wrong places” but found love and joy and peace in a growing love relationship with my Creator.

The Westminster Larger Catechism says, “Man’s chief and highest end is to glorify God, and fully to enjoy him forever.”³⁰

It is said that when A. W. Tozer discovered a certain book, his life changed direction and the rest of his life was very focused and purposeful. I think it is safe to say that he did that to me when I found him. A friend handed me A. W. Tozer’s *The Pursuit of God*, and my life has never been the same. This book helped me to refocus on what I am here for. Tozer helped me to focus on loving and worshipping God. I am seeking to live the “Worship-Driven Life.” The focus and changes in my life are flowing out of a growing desire to know God better. It is my prayer that we all catch the vision and have the desire to know God fully as He reveals Himself to us. Lord, as we look into Your holiness, the things of this world fade away into shadows in the light of You!

29 Ken Curtis, “Priceless Wisdom from Bro. Lawrence,” Christianity.com, <http://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/timeline/1601-1700/priceless-wisdom-from-bro-lawrence-11630063.html>.

30 Westminster Larger Catechism (Edinburgh, Scotland: 1648).

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Prayer for life with a purpose, the right purpose:

Father, help me to see and know I was created by You and for You, that I may know my chief end is to glorify You. Help me to see You in Your Word and come to a progressively deeper and sweeter knowledge of You. May all the rest of the world become a shadow in the light of knowing and loving You. May I come to You now, Lord, yielding my life to You, surrendering myself to You, not being shaped by the world but being transformed in my mind by You, Lord. I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

CHAPTER 39

WHO GOD IS IN HIMSELF

GOD KNOWS YOU, AND He wants each of us to know Him. God reveals Himself to us in a number of ways—through His Word, through prayer, through the Body of Christ (all believers), through worship, and through creation itself—so we can absolutely know God.³¹ The Apostle Paul described how God reveals Himself in creation: “For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse” (Romans 1:19-20).

One of the best ways to know God is simply to read and think on what He has said about Himself. God has shown us and told us who He is through His Word, the Holy Bible. He is the best source of knowledge about Himself, and so we must spend time with Him and listen to God as He speaks to us in and through the very Word of God, the Holy Bible. Often people say, “I just have trouble finding time to read the Bible.” Here is a simple but pointed observation: Reading the Bible is not a matter of finding time but establishing priorities. If God is your number one priority in life, you have no problem finding time to listen to what He has to say. We need to seek God first before anything or anyone else.

³¹ God is God, and man is not. We cannot fully know God as long as we are in these bodies. One day we will see Him as He really is, but for today God has given us the full revelation of Himself that we need to know and love and worship Him.

Here is a list of what God says or reveals about Himself,³² what many have referred to as the “attributes of God.” In the English Standard Version of the Holy Bible, quoted above, Romans 1:19-20 refers to God’s “invisible attributes” and “divine nature.” There are many books and other writings listing the attributes of God that include attributes beyond those I have chosen to list here. There are also some very scholarly writings that have a shorter list than the one listed here. The attributes of God presented here seem to be both clear and sufficient. The ones that might be added to this list are, in my observation, simply part and parcel of what is listed here. For example, some would list “good” as an attribute, and certainly God is absolutely good in every way; however, the holiness and fairness of God incorporate His goodness. The simple truth is that all of God’s attributes are complementary and supportive of one another. There are no inconsistencies of any kind in God. So, the list of God’s attributes offered here includes the following:

- God is One: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
- God is light.
- God is love.
- God is infinite.
- God is eternal.
- God is almighty.
- God is all knowing.
- God is omnipresent.
- God is merciful.
- God is just.
- God is gracious.
- God is sovereign.
- God is unchanging.
- God is holy.
- God is fair.
- God is righteous.

These attributes (“divine qualities”) of God reveal all we need to know about God in order to love and trust and worship and live for

³² I have seen a number of different viewpoints on the number and specifics of what we here call the “attributes of God.” I do not claim this to be an exhaustive listing of God’s attributes; there is not enough paper or books in the world for such a list. These are the ones that I have heard from God on.

Him. No matter how long a list we might choose to give, we know God is so much more than these simple words and more than all the words this world contains. God cannot be defined with a pen or a word processor; God is infinitely larger than even our deepest sense and knowledge of who He is.

We have to be careful when we describe God. One of the problems is that we tend to speak of God using the same words and phrases we might use for other people. When we are describing people, we speak of their personality traits, how they act. This may be an acceptable means of describing people, but it does not work for God at all. When we speak of the attributes of God, we are not speaking of how God acts but of what and who God is.

God does not act lovingly; God is love! God does not simply extend grace; He is gracious. God is holy. When we read, "God is light," it is not just a description of what God has done but of who God is. God is light; light is part of God's essence. This is true of all God's attributes. These attributes are who God is, and so when we come to know God, we are coming to know He is light, love, grace, and likewise for each of God's limitless attributes.

God's attributes do not change depending upon the circumstances He is confronted with. God is not a loving God on certain days and a just God on other days. God is loving and just at the same time, all the time. In fact, all of God's attributes work perfectly and seamlessly together at all times. God's holiness is in perfect step with His graciousness. God's perfect knowledge of all things is completely in line with His mercy.

We need to know God because He is God. We need to know God because He is our Creator, our Savior, and our Strength; He is our everything. We also need to know God because knowing God as He really is will guide us through the troubled waters we encounter daily. When we know God loves us, know He isn't going anywhere, know He never changes, and know He is fair in every way, we will be transformed in how we see and respond to life's challenges.

Knowing God gives you real confidence to face the storm that will come blowing into your life today. Knowing God doesn't just guide us through the storm but allows us to dance in the rain with great peace and joy. We have new strength to face life "for the joy of the LORD is your strength" (Nehemiah 8:10).

Oh the joy that daily floods the soul of the one who leans upon the everlasting Lord. Life really begins when you are fully trusting in the

Who God Is in Himself

one true God and nothing that life throws at you can take that joy from you. One may, as I did earlier today, lose sight of this truth momentarily, but the minute we bring ourselves back³³ into the presence of God, the joy of who He is carries us through.

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. ⁵ Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; ⁶ do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:4-7)



Prayer to see and begin to better understand the reality and daily significance to each of us of who God is, His divine attributes:

God, thank You that You are light for our eyes and our feet as we trod the paths of life; You are love that we might love You and others; thank You that You are infinite in all Your ways; You are eternal and invite us into eternal life; You are almighty in the time of our needs; You are all knowing when we don't know up from down; You are present when we feel so alone; You are merciful every morning without measure; You are just in all You do, fair in every way; Your grace is sufficient for us; You are sovereign over all; You are holy and call us to be holy. Thank You, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, that You are all of these and infinitely more, and all of these things You are, You have always been and shall ever be— You change not. Thank You, Lord. Amen.

33 It is we who leave; God has been there all along. God never goes anywhere; He is already everywhere, the great "I Am."

CHAPTER 40

GOD IS ONE: FATHER, SON, AND HOLY SPIRIT

“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.”

—Deuteronomy 6:4

THE HOLY TRINITY IS ONE God who exists in three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—who are one. The absolute truth of the Trinity is simultaneously undeniable yet wholly unexplainable with words. The inexplicable complexity of the Trinity does not speak against its reality but instead stands strongly supportive of the Trinity. God is far above knowing. He reveals Himself perfectly according to His will, and His revelation is more than sufficient in every way. Yet in God’s oneness and in His Trinitarianism, we can only say, “Thou knowest, O Lord.”

The Holy Trinity is clearly presented from Genesis to Revelation. The existence of the Trinity, while vigorously disputed by a relatively small group of professing Christians, has been fully recognized by the vast majority of Christianity since shortly after the death of Christ Jesus.

This is not an explanation of the incomprehensible mystery of the truth and holiness of the Trinity. The existence of the Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) is abundantly clear in Scripture. Believing in and trusting God are foundational to Christianity. Think of Abram (later to be renamed Abraham), who believed God against all odds (his age about one hundred, his wife barren and about age ninety) that he would become the father of a son and of many nations. Faith

in God is required, but the reality is that everyone has faith in one thing or another. The fact that the Trinity cannot be fully explained or understood does not stand in opposition to the reality of the Trinity. The Trinity will never be reasoned out; it is perceived by faith in God as He reveals the reality to us throughout the whole of Scripture.

The existence and reality of the Trinity are mysterious yet imminently apparent in the Word of God. Beyond the Word of God, the personal experience of relationship with the Father through the Son as guided and filled by the Holy Spirit is all the evidence needed for personal witness. Instead of weighing against its own reality, the incomprehensibility of the Trinity is a strong confirmation to all who seek God by faith. God has given us more than sufficient evidence for all we need to know of Him, but He would not be the one true God if He could be contained within or explained by the human mind. We, you and I, the creation, cannot fully comprehend the Creator! If we could fully understand God, He would not in fact be God.

The Triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (someone has said the three “Whos” of the one “What”³⁴)—is present and evident in God’s Word from Genesis to Revelation. In the same way that God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is evident throughout Scripture, He is likewise fully evident experientially in the daily life of a born-again, Spirit-filled Christ follower. Yet our experience falls far short of a full experience or explanation of Almighty God.

God, who is above our ability to fully comprehend, has nonetheless revealed Himself in His Word, in personal experiences with all who are in Christ, and in His own creation. We have been presented with more than enough God for us to see Him and know Him. Yet, there is much more to God than we will ever take in. Nowhere is that more true than when we look at the Triune God.

The Triune God has always been. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit—not three Gods; there is only one God, but He is one God existing in three persons—has always been and so shall He always be. In John 17:24, Jesus spoke of the love of the Father for the Son before the foundation of the world: “Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.”

³⁴ There are many such human efforts to put the Trinity into words; they are all well meaning and often well thought-out but nevertheless fall far short of even an adequate explanation of the fullness of the unexplainable God.

In our humanity, we are presently limited by the dimensions of time, space, and matter. Because our whole frame of reference is with what can be held in our hand, grasping the full reality of what exists beyond the physical is impossible apart from faith. Yet, as challenging as the Trinity is to understand, a born-again Christian experientially knows the Trinity in their heart and spirit because the Trinity is a part of our daily experience of God.

God knows more about God than any person ever has known or could know. There is no better resource for knowing God than the Word of God. Let us see what God Himself reveals about Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the Bible. First, let's look at Genesis:

¹ In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. ² The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. ³ And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. ⁴ And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵ God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day. (Genesis 1:1-5)

Here in Genesis, we see Father God as Creator. Simultaneously, we see the Holy Spirit—"Spirit of God"—present "hovering over the face of the waters." Then God speaks and light is created. We know from John's Gospel, chapter 1 and verse 1, that "In the beginning was the Word," and that refers to Jesus. Jesus is the "Word" who is the agent of creation referred to in Genesis. So in creation, we see the one God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Later in Genesis, we see God referring to Himself in this way:

²⁶ Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." (Genesis 1:26)

²² Then the LORD God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil." (Genesis 3:22)

⁷ "Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another's speech." (Genesis 11:7)

Love stands as both abstract and concrete proof of the Holy Trinity. We know from Scripture and from experience that God is love.

⁸ Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. (1 John 4:8)

Because we know God is love and we know God never changes, we are led to the unavoidable conclusion that love existed prior to creation. Love, to exist, must have the one loving and the one being loved. Prior to creation, there existed God the Father loving God the Son, God the Son loving God the Holy Spirit, and God the Holy Spirit loving God the Father. The Trinity is self-evident in this one thing, that God has always been love and that love could only exist, prior to creation, in the three: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

One profound scriptural presentation of the Trinity is found in Matthew's Gospel:

¹³ Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴ John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" ¹⁵ But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. ¹⁶ And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; ¹⁷ and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." (Matthew 3:13-17)

Here we see that all three persons of the Trinity are one God in triune appearance: Father in heaven, Son coming up out of the water, and Holy Spirit descending upon Jesus.

A. W. Tozer gave us this observation on the Trinity:

Some persons who reject all they cannot explain have denied that God is a Trinity. Subjecting the Most High to their cold, level-eyed scrutiny, they conclude that it is impossible that He could be both One and Three. These forget that their whole life is enshrouded in mystery. They fail to consider that any real explanation of even the simplest phenomenon in nature lies hidden in obscurity and can no more be explained than can the mystery of the Godhead. . . .

The doctrine of the Trinity is truth for the heart. The spirit of man alone can enter through the veil and penetrate into that Holy of Holies. "Let me seek Thee in longing," pleaded Anselm,³⁵

35 Tozer is quoting Saint Anselm of Canterbury, a Benedictine monk, philosopher, and theologian from the eleventh century. Anselm was Archbishop, Doctor of the Church. Celebration of Feast Day is April 21. Taken from Father Joseph Vann, ed., *Lives of Saints* (J. J. Crawley, 1954).

"let me long for Thee in seeking; let me find Thee in love, and love Thee in finding." Love and faith are at home in the mystery of the Godhead. Let reason kneel in reverence outside.³⁶

Christ did not hesitate to use the plural form when speaking of Himself along with the Father and the Spirit: "We will come to him and make our home with him" (John 14:23). Yet again He said, "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30).

A. W. Tozer said, "It is most important that we think of God as Trinity in Unity, neither confounding the Persons nor dividing the Substance. Only so may we think rightly of God and in a manner worthy of Him and of our own souls."³⁷

It was our Lord's claim to equality with the Father that outraged the religionists of His day and led at last to His crucifixion. The attack on the doctrine of the Trinity two centuries later by Arius and others was also aimed at Christ's claim to deity. During the Arian controversy, 318 church fathers (many of them maimed and scarred by the physical violence suffered in earlier persecutions) met at Nicaea and adopted a statement of faith, one section of which runs,

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.³⁸

For more than 1,600 years, this has stood as the final test of orthodoxy, as well it should, for it condenses in theological language the teaching of the New Testament concerning the position of the Son in the Godhead.

The Nicene Creed also pays tribute to the Holy Spirit as being Himself God and equal to the Father and the Son:

36 A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York: HarperCollins, 1961), 17, 20.

37 Tozer, *Knowledge of the Holy*, 20.

38 Nicene Creed, <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/>.

God Is One: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

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 Son is adored and glorified.³⁹

God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is and has always been. They have no cause, no origin. God has always been. He told Moses His name is “I AM WHO I AM” (Exodus 3:14). In the Gospel of John we read, “Jesus said to them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am’” (John 8:58).

Then, regarding the Holy Spirit we see in Genesis, chapter 1: “The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters” (Genesis 1:2).

God is and has always been: “Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God” (Psalm 90:1-2).

We see from John’s First Epistle a picture of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit:

⁹ In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him.

¹⁰ In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. ¹¹ Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us. ¹³ By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. ¹⁴ And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. ¹⁵ Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. (1 John 4:9-15)

What does the Trinity mean to me and to you today? Everything! God the Father has created us to be in relationship with Him. God the Son died that we might be reconciled to God the Father, and Jesus is before God right now as our advocate, pleading our case before the Father. Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to guide us into all truth. Listen to what Jesus Himself said about the Holy Spirit:

⁴ And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said,

³⁹ Nicene Creed.

"you heard from me;⁵ for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." (Acts 1:4-5)

Yes, we can see the Holy Trinity, but we still must acknowledge there is much about God that cannot be known to man. God is so much larger than man can ever possibly understand.

⁸ For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. ⁹ For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. (Isaiah 55:8-9)

What we do know of the Trinity we know by faith and by experience. I may not be able to tell you so much about the Trinity in a scholarly sense, yet I can give you a strong witness from my own experience. God is more real than anything I can put my hand on, see with my eyes, or sense with any other sense. The God of the Bible, existing as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, ministers to me and in me and I pray through me daily. Nothing in this temporary world is as real as the everlasting reality of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Let me close this chapter with one other quote from A. W. Tozer:

Who is this within the veil who dwells in fiery manifestations? It is none other than God Himself, "One God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible," and "One Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God; begotten of His Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God; begotten, not made; being of one substance with the Father," and "the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of life, Who proceedeth from the Father and the Son, Who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified." Yet this holy Trinity is One God, for "we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the Substance. For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Ghost. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, is all one: the glory equal and the majesty coeternal." So in part run the ancient creeds, and so the inspired Word declares.⁴⁰

40 Tozer, *Knowledge of the Holy*, chapter 4.

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Prayer acknowledging God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit:

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we acknowledge right now that You and You alone are God. You are one, dwelling in perfect unity since before time, from all eternity. We don't fully understand the Godhead, but we know that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are each and all fully one and yet each operates in different but completely harmonious ways to bring us to a saving knowledge of Christ, saving us and leading us and sustaining us and keeping us and carrying us through this life into life eternal. We thank You, God, for loving us in the unique ways that only You can, ever have, and ever will. You are God, and our everything is in You. Lord, help us to be one with You as You—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—are and have always been one. Amen.

CHAPTER 41

GOD IS LIGHT

“This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.”

—1 John 1:5

GOD IS THE BLESSED LIGHT to show the way, and He is the Way. “God is light” is not a message about what God does but who God is. “God is light!” There is no darkness in God. We never have to worry that God is going to have a bad day; He is always light. It is who God is. He is the light that never goes out, never dims or fades.

What does “God is light” mean to me personally? If I want light, I can just get up and flip the switch myself, right? Yes, unless you lose power, you can get up and flip a switch and there is light, but this is only true because God is light and apart from Him there would be no light of any kind. He is light and the source of all light (not Thomas Edison and not the power company); all light is ultimately from God.

¹In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. ²The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. ³And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. ⁴And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day. (Genesis 1:1-5)

He is not *the* light, He is not *a* light, He *is* light.⁴¹ God's nature is light. God is not just light but He is also the source of light, and it was His very first act in creation. He spoke and there was light.

God is light "and in him is no darkness at all" means there are not even shadows with God. He is perfect, pure light. There is not even a hint of shadow or darkness. Light does not fellowship with darkness; the two are opposing forces. Light conquers darkness. This is important for us to know on several levels; the one I want to focus on is our thoughts of "little sins."

God knows of no such thing as a "little sin"; sin is absolutely putrid to God, offensive to Him in every way. There is no such thing as a "little white lie." Lying is contrary to God, and He hates it in me, in you, or in anyone. We need to know God is light and in Him there is not even a shadow of darkness. This principle of absolute light extends to all things: there is no such thing as an innocent look at a pornographic website; there is no such thing as covering up something little; there is no such thing as harmless gossip; and on and on. God is light; in Him is *no darkness at all!*

When you are born again and God is living in you, then the light in you is greater than the darkness around you!

⁴But you belong to God, my dear children. You have already won a victory over those people, because the Spirit who lives in you is greater than the spirit who lives in the world. (1 John 4:4, NLT)

We need to know the light in us is greater than the darkness around us. We will talk about God's power more specifically in a later chapter, but "God is light" speaks of a great power to overcome darkness. We need to walk each day with a clear awareness that the power of God exhibited in His light is with us and in us and is able to and has already overcome the darkness that comes against us.

What does "God is light" have to do with our daily lives? How will knowing God is light and in Him is no darkness at all help me pay my bills, cure my cancer, solve my marriage issues? When we know and embrace the truth that God is light and in Him there is no darkness, it will transform our lives as we live each day in the pure light of this great truth of who God is. We live and face our challenges in the pure light of God; it is who He is. The cancer diagnosis is brought into the light, and we know our loving God is in control. No matter what a test result

41 H. D. M. Spence-Jones, ed., *1 John* (London; New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1909), 3–4.

shows, in God all is well. The same can be said for each of these daily issues that most of us face on a regular basis. Start looking at life from the standpoint of being loved by the one true God, who is perfect light.

Darkness confronts us daily. Darkness comes in the form of evil thoughts that beset each of us—about other people, about our circumstances, about who we are. When we know God is light and we, in faith, walk in that light, the darkness is driven back by the light. Light in us (God) reveals the sin of attacking others; the truth about whose we are and that He is bigger than our circumstances; that we are new creations in Christ, the old has gone and all things have been made new. We can say assuredly God is light; He is in my life; no matter what dark clouds appear in this world today, with God I am okay. The light of God in me and in you is greater than any darkness that exists.

God is light, a light that outshines the darkness of “you have cancer,” “I am leaving you,” “you are no good,” “you have no money,” or any other circumstance that confronts you today. In the popular vernacular one might ask, “What is in your wallet?” If your answer is “God is in my life, and I am in God,” then you are dwelling in light—and not just any light but *the* light—and in Him there is no darkness. No one can say or do anything to force us into darkness. All born-again Christians can say with total assurance, “By the grace of God, I am in the light; all is well.”

Light is good. In every aspect in our life, we sense and know that light is good. Light speaks of good, and even more, light is a good that seeks to spread—sending forth its wonderful qualities that bring good things to everything touched by them. Think of how wonderful the light is when you see the first gleam of daybreak. The dark night is dispelled with the first hint of dawn. That is all about light. God is light.

When people want to do bad things, they seek to hide it in the darkness. If you want to expose evil, you bring the light to shine on it. We all—yes, all of us—have things we wish and hope the light never shines on. The truth is, even in those challenging circumstances, the best thing that can happen is for light to come in. Once we confess our darkness to God, we have more light and less shadow.

¹⁶Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. ¹⁷Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. ¹⁸Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures. (James 1:16-18)

In God there is no darkness or even any shadows. God's presence and purpose in our lives bring us into His light and allow us to see all the darkness disappear. In God—not just His presence but God in us—there can be no shadows. The light is good. When we learn of God's nature, that He is light, it frees us to confess our sins, shed the darkness and the shadows, and live in the pure light of His love—His "Son-Light." The light of God in our lives signifies that which is really good, eternally good; all darkness is driven away.

The light of God in my life reveals areas of darkness in me. One of these will prevail: either I will offer my dark spot to the light (confess and repent) or I will turn to darkness and break my fellowship with God. Light and dark have no communion. God is light, and He makes all the difference in our lives and in this world in which we live.

A commentary on 1 John describes the light of God this way: "The Divine Light is subject to no spots, no eclipse, no twilight, no night; as a Source of light it cannot in any degree fail."⁴² We are called to the light, to "walk in the light": "If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin" (1 John 1:6-7).

We will also see, because of God's other attributes, the light is not going away; it is forever and ever, and as we come to know God better, His light grows brighter day by day. Come, Lord Jesus, and let the light of Your love shine into the darkness of this world and into our very lives.

42 Spence-Jones, *1 John*, 3–4.

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Prayer for the light of God in our lives:

God, You are the light, and we ask You to shine Your light into our lives right now. Reveal to us any shadows or darkness that we are trying to hold on to, and dispel the evil through Your presence in us as we acknowledge and confess our sins and turn from darkness to You. Lord, help us to know that no matter how dark our circumstances may seem, You are light, and when our circumstances are exposed to You, darkness, no matter how dark the dark, disappears. In You there is no darkness at all. By putting our trust in You, the darkness disappears from our lives. Your light far outshines and dispels the darkness. We thank You, Lord, that whether our problems go away or You work through them, we rejoice because the darkness is gone. We know no matter how difficult the problem, You are brighter than the darkest dark and the evil must flee in Your presence. Thank You, God, that You are light and in You, and You in us, there is no darkness at all. Amen.

CHAPTER 42

GOD IS LOVE

"Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love."

—1 John 4:8

THE MESSAGE HERE IS CLEAR: Love is the very essence of what God is. Theologian Adam Clarke put it so well when he said,

It has been well observed that, although God is holy, just, righteous, etc., he is never called *holiness, justice*, etc., in the *abstract*, as he is here called **LOVE**. This seems to be the essence of the Divine nature, and all other attributes to be only modifications of this.⁴³

Love is a challenging word in English because we use the one word to express how we feel about food, cars, favorite sports teams, people, and God. In the New Testament, there are four distinct Greek words for love, each referring to different types of love. The word referenced above in 1 John 4:8 ("God is love") is the word *agape*.

Agape is:

Love, affectionate regard, goodwill, benevolence. With reference to God's love, it is God's willful direction toward man. It involves God doing what He knows is best for man and not necessarily what man desires. For example, John 3:16 states,

43 Adam Clarke, *First John* (1835), electronic ed. (Albany, OR: Ages Software, 1999).
1 Jn 4:8.

"For God so loved [ēgápēsen] the world, that he gave." What did He give? Not what man wanted, but what God knew man needed, i.e., His Son to bring forgiveness to man.⁴⁴

When God *agapes* us, it means He is doing that which is the very best for us. What God seeks is better than anything else we could ever find or do on our own. The only way we miss the very best in life is if we miss God because God always comes with our best as He *agapes* us.

When God speaks of love, it has nothing to do with emotion. God is referring to His intentional and purposeful will of bringing us what is best for us. God's love is seen in both who He is and what He does. Nowhere is this more obvious than in this familiar verse: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

God's love for us is us getting the very best He has for us. Knowing God's love is best and trusting God in His love are essential for our spiritual growth. Receive and rest on this truth: In every way and at all times God expresses Himself in love to us. Love is such a pervasive and intrinsic aspect of who God is and all He does; it is imperative we understand these very pointed statements about God's love and our responsibility in responding to His love.

⁸ Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. (1 John 4:8)

¹⁶ For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him. (John 3:16-17, NLT)

¹⁰ In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. ¹¹ Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us. (1 John 4:10-12)

God is love, and He calls us into a love relationship with Him. God calls you and me to love. Jesus expressed the centrality of love in the life of a Christian during His conversation with an expert in the religious law:

³⁶ "Teacher, which is the most important commandment in the law of Moses?" ³⁷ Jesus replied, "'You must love the LORD your God with

44 Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*, electronic ed. (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2000).

all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.’³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment.³⁹ A second is equally important: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’⁴⁰ The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments.” (Matthew 22:36-40, NLT)

The call to love is powerful and should penetrate and permeate every aspect of a Christian’s life. There is no way to avoid God’s call to love Him by obeying His command to love others.

¹⁵ If you love me, you will keep my commandments. (John 14:15)

²⁰ If anyone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.²¹ And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother. (1 John 4:20-21)

God is love; we are not. Following God’s lead here is not our natural human response to life and people. We do not know how to *agape* with our flesh. This is why Jesus told Nicodemus we must be born again not of the flesh but of the Spirit.

³ Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”⁴ Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?”⁵ Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” (John 3:3-6)

If a person’s life is characterized by love, we can know for sure it is the presence of the Holy Spirit who accomplishes in us that which God has called us to.

¹⁴ For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died;¹⁵ and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.¹⁶ From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer.¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. (2 Corinthians 5:14-17)

Daily living out the love God calls us to is an act of the Holy Spirit in us. Even though we are new creatures, we are still residing in our earthly bodies, which we call flesh, and our flesh is at war with the Spirit in us. In order to live a life of love, we have to live by the Spirit not by the flesh.

¹⁶ But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷ For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. ¹⁹ Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality,²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions,²¹ envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. ²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,²³ gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. ²⁴ And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. (Galatians 5:16-24)

The Holy Spirit in us is God in us, and God is love! For us to live out the love of God, we have to be obedient to the Spirit of God.

How does God's love change who we are and how we live? In everything and in every way! One way is this: How should we respond to mistreatment by others?⁴⁵ God is love and God is in control,⁴⁶ so whatever happens in our lives happens through the filter of God's love. When someone steps on our toes or confronts us head-on, we have to, in the Spirit, acknowledge that God is love and respond accordingly. I have to do some serious self-talking, which goes something like this:

I want to give him a piece of my mind for what he said to or about me. But I know God is love, so what must I do?

Let me walk through this truth about God:

God is God.

God is sovereign. (He has ultimate control and say-so over life.)

God is love.

Whatever happens in my life is caused or allowed by God.

The events of my life are an expression of God's love.

I can rejoice in the Lord in what is happening; yes, even when it hurts, I can rejoice in the Lord because He is allowing this for His good purposes.

So, I can't give him a piece of my mind; instead, I have to *agape* him as God *agapes* me.

⁴⁵ This does not refer to a spouse or a child being abused or any other similar abuse. I am referring here to the normal give-and-take in daily life when people offend us.

⁴⁶ The sovereignty of God is addressed in a later chapter.

Because God loves me, He allows things to happen in my life that will, regardless of how they feel at the moment, work for my ultimate good and God's ultimate glory. So, I can know God is doing good stuff, and I can rejoice even in the midst of a problem.

²⁸ And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

²⁹ For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. (Romans 8:28-29)

God's ultimate purpose is that we become Christlike. Christlikeness happens in the crucible of false accusations and mistreatments, the daily fare Jesus dealt with. So, no matter what is going on, we can: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice" (Philippians 4:4).

The transformation from selfishness to Christlikeness happens in the storms of life. Knowing God loves us, knowing God desires the best for us, and knowing the storm clouds are a gift from God to take us from where we are to where we need to be allow us to embrace our sufferings as part of God's love. Paul recognized this and proclaimed the following as his great desire: "that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead" (Philippians 3:10-11).

²⁰ But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself. (Philippians 3:20-21)

As we begin to understand God as love and what that means for our lives and the circumstances we face, we undergo a transformation process that radically changes how we respond to life. James clearly proclaimed our new way of responding to life and all its challenges: "Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing" (James 1:2-4, NLT).

The events of our lives are an expression of God's love. The love of God does not seek our approval but our transformation, our ultimate happiness. In this very hour, I find myself battling what seem to me to be false personal attacks. Let me translate that: God is trying to grow

me up, but my pride is getting in the way. Pride is the very thing that has to depart for us to live a life in love; the love God has called us to by His acts of love in and toward us is a life of humility.

We have to learn to trust God with all our heart; we have to know God and live our lives with the clear knowledge that God is love and what He permits into our lives is an expression of His love. God is love, and the events of life are overlaid on and interlaced with God's love. Our growing awareness that life is acted out on the canvas of God's love gives us a completely new perspective about our daily challenges. When we wake up with a growing awareness of God's *agape* love seeking the very best for us, we experience a transformational shift in how we live.

One of the most amazing biblical examples of this principle is found in the story of Joseph. Joseph, the son of Jacob, was sold into slavery by his older brothers; he was falsely accused of attempted rape and thrown into prison; he provided great help to some powerful men, who then promptly forgot about Joseph and left him in prison for years. Then suddenly Joseph was let out of prison and became prime minister over all of Egypt. Later, his brothers came to him for food; when they realized the person who was in charge over all of Egypt was the very brother they had sold into slavery, they were terrified. Joseph simply said to them, "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today" (Genesis 50:19-20).

God is love—not that we loved Him, but that He loved us and gave His Son for us. God's love, the essence of who He is, provides comfort no matter what challenges and difficulties we encounter on our daily journey through life; we can and must always say, "I know God is love, He loves me, all is well no matter what!"

†

Prayer of recognition and thanksgiving for God's love:

Heavenly Father, You are love, and we rest in Your love today. Father, no matter what anyone else says, no matter how anyone else feels about us or toward us, You love us. Love is who You are. Thank You that Your love does not come and go but is constant; Your love is unchanging and Your love will never be less than it is right now; there is nothing we can do to make You love us more because Your love is perfect, full, and ever present. Lord, help us to comprehend the vastness of Your love for us in Christ; no matter what we are facing today, we can rest in Your love, which is higher than our struggle, deeper than our hurt, wider than the attack we face, and longer than the problem we are wrestling with. God is love, and all of life changes when we know who You are. You are a good, good Father; You are perfect in all of Your ways, especially in Your love. We love You, Lord. Amen.

CHAPTER 43

GOD IS INFINITE

“Great is our Lord, and abundant in power; his understanding is beyond measure.”

—Psalm 147:5

IN OCTOBER 1962, THE ENTIRE world was held captive by the Cuban Missile Crisis. “Would Nikita Khrushchev and Fidel Castro destroy the world by starting a nuclear war?” I was an eight-year-old living in the small town of Meadville, Mississippi, and the adult conversation was dominated by fear of a world-ending nuclear war. With sleep eluding me, I lay in bed pondering a question born out of the adult conversations I kept overhearing: “If they blow up the world with hydrogen bombs, what will be when the world is gone?” This perplexing thought remained with me long after the crisis passed. Today people have similar thoughts and fears with both nuclear and terrorist threats hanging over us. We can be consumed with fear, or we can seek the one true answer to world-ending threats.

There was only one answer in 1962, and there is only one answer in today: the one and only infinite God. The world had a definite starting point, and it has a definite ending point. Not so with God. He is infinite, without beginning and without end. This created world and all that is in it had a specific point of beginning. There will also be a specific point when this world, as we know it, will cease to exist. This is a finite world, but God is infinite.

The primary reason we do not get God’s infiniteness is that everything we can see, touch, hear, and smell is created. Every physical thing

has a beginning date and an expiration date; in other words, everything we see and touch is finite. We, too, in our flesh, are finite people living in a finite world, and we have no real concept of God's infinitude.

All created things have a creator. Not so the creator. He cannot both create and be created; at least He can't be both and be God. God, the Creator, has no beginning or end; in fact, He cannot have a beginning or an end—if He did, He would not be God. God has always been, so shall He always be. He is before all things and after all things. He is Alpha and Omega. God is, in His very essence, infinite.

Does God's infinitude mean anything to you personally? What does God's infiniteness have to do with how you will live your life today? Everything and in every way! There is no attribute of God more important to our daily lives than God's infinitude. There is only one who is infinite, and He is the one and only true God who was and is and is to come. He is the great "I AM."

People have always made gods for themselves out of stone, metal, wood, and other objects. People have made money their god, fame their god, and all sorts of other gods. None of this works; you and I know this because we have experienced it personally. Every one of us, in one way or another, has experienced the effect of making something a god in our lives; none of those things work, and none of them lasts. We can only find what we need in the one true God who is, in His very essence, infinite.

The second crucial thing for us to see and know from God's infinitude is this: God is infinite in all His ways. God is infinite in His being, and He is infinite in His love. God is infinite in every aspect of who He is, in all His actions, thoughts, and attributes. For example, God is infinitely good, which is infinitely important for me and for you!

God's infiniteness is relevant and critical to each of us in our daily lives because life has moments that are so overwhelming, they literally suck the breath of life out of everyone involved: the death of a child, a devastating earthquake or hurricane, 9/11. The events are so disturbing that life itself ceases to make sense. In those times, a finite god who can be fully known and understood by our limited minds has no chance to truly be God. Only an infinite God, a God who has infinite knowledge and power and love, can overshadow and begin to make sense and purpose out of such unsettling times in our lives. In those times we can cry out and say, "Lord, I don't understand, but I am so thankful that You do. You know the beginning from the end. You, O Lord, can

make sense of this, and we just look to and rest in You. Thank You for being God in and through these times.”

Man has been on the earth for thousands of years. The study and contemplation of the human body and mind have been underway throughout the history of humankind. Likewise, humans have gazed upon the solar system and all its components, seeking to understand how it all fits together. Only a truly infinite God—a God who is above and beyond all that we see and understand—could possibly give account for the complexity of the far reaches of space as well as our human bodies and all their internal systems. These things, despite all our advances in science, are yet today infinitely beyond our understanding! Thus is God in His infiniteness revealed.

Now, let’s bring God’s infinitude home to the immediate discussions taking place around our kitchen tables and see how it matters. When you wake up in the morning knowing that radical Islamic jihadists and other terrorists would rejoice to see you, your family, your state, and even your nation totally annihilated; when you know there are countries and groups who would like nothing better than to strike your country with a nuclear explosive; when you know that you have nothing to protect you from such cataclysmic events, you must have an infinite God.

Only an infinite God can answer and give comfort in the face of such horrific thoughts. The immensity of the evil planned against you daily can only be kept in perspective by knowing God is infinite. He is infinite in every way—infinite in His love, wisdom, power, strength, presence, and peace. God’s will and plans are infinitely higher and stronger than anything planned against us. We can say to such persons and to whoever seeks to do us in, “You come against me with your hate, but I stand in the strength of the great and constant ‘I AM,’ the God who made you and me. I will not fear, and I will not run. God is infinitely greater than your threats against me.” When we rise up and when we lie down, as we walk about this upside-down world today, we see our desperate need for a very real God who truly loves us with an immeasurable love—an infinite love.

God’s infiniteness is what allows us to reach out to someone who would seek to destroy us and say, “God has told me to love you, and I obey Him now. God has told me to forgive you for wanting me and my family and my entire nation to be annihilated. I forgive you now in the matchless and infinite name of Jesus Christ.”

†

Prayer acknowledging God's infinitude:

Lord, we are so grateful that You are God and that there is no limit to Your presence, Your provision, Your protection, and Your power. We trust You, God, because You are infinitely larger than our worst fears and nothing is too difficult for You. We thank You, Lord, that Your peace, which passes our ability to understand, will guard our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus, and nothing this finite world throws our way can change Your purposes. You alone are God! You are in control, and we put all our trust and all our hope in You. We draw all our peace, comfort, and joy from the only true God; You are infinite in all Your ways. Amen.

CHAPTER 44

GOD IS ETERNAL

*“Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations.
Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the whole
world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.”*

—Psalm 90:1-2 (NIV)

BEFORE TIME BEGAN, GOD WAS. He told Moses that His name was “I AM” (Exodus 3:14). He also said He is the Alpha and Omega: “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end” (Revelation 22:13).

God is eternal. He was God before creation. He will be God after this world ceases to be. God is eternal, without beginning and without end.

Does God being eternal mean anything specifically to our individual lives, or is this just meaningless chatter (what someone has referred to as “metaphysical bric-a-brac”)? The answer is simple but profound: God’s eternality is not just important today; it is absolutely crucial to every aspect of our lives—now and forever.

What do we mean when we say eternal? First, because we exist in time and have no way to go outside the time we are in, we have to admit we don’t fully understand what eternal means. But, having given that disclaimer, let’s state what we do know.

- God is.
- God has always been.
- God will always be.

- There is no time or point before time began that God was not.
- There is no time or point after time ceases that God will not be God.
- God was, is, and shall ever be.

So what? So everything! God can only be God if He is eternal. If God is not eternal, then there would be a time when God was not. If ever there was a time when God was not, then He would not be God—God would be whoever or whatever existed when God was not God. God is God and always has been and shall forever be.

God's eternality is not something He accomplishes or does; God's eternality is an essential ingredient of who God is. There is no part of God or any of His attributes that is not eternal. Just as God is infinite in all His ways, so God is eternal in who He is and in all of His ways.

Space, time, and matter are the essential ingredients we relate to as human beings. We occupy space, we are in time, and our bodies constitute matter. Physically, we are bound by these (space, time, and matter). God is eternal: He does not occupy space (yet He fills all of the world); He exists outside the realm of time (the eternal now); He is not a part of matter (He is larger than anything we know or can imagine but cannot be touched in the sense of touching something physical or something made of matter). Those ingredients (space, time, matter) are acted upon by what we call laws of nature, such as gravity. Everything in our physical being is subject to those laws of nature; God is not.

God, not being bound by time, is in the eternal present. God, in one continuous view, is looking at creation, all of time, Christ's first coming, the future return of Christ Jesus—and they are all simultaneous⁴⁷ to God. To Him, these are all now; all things are before His eyes at one time. These points on the continuum of time, as we measure and try to understand it, are one for God.

I best try to assimilate this in my mind by thinking of time and eternity like this: A yardstick represents all of time; the left end of the yardstick represents the time of creation; the right end of the yardstick represents the return of Christ Jesus; and, finally, a point (it doesn't matter which point) along that line of time, whether at thirteen inches or thirty-five and three quarters of an inch, represents the present. God is holding the yardstick and is simultaneously looking at every

⁴⁷ *Simultaneous* is a word that relates to time and so is not adequate here, but it is what we have to work with.

point in time along the time line from creation to the end. God is also looking into eternity past and eternity future at the same time. God is outside of and not bound by time. God is eternal.

⁹ Remember the former things, those of long ago; I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me.¹⁰ I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: "My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please." (Isaiah 46:9-10, NIV)

Listen now to what the eternal God says to us about our lives; His precious words tell of how He created us and has known us from eternity:

¹ You have searched me, LORD,
and you know me.

² You know when I sit and when I rise;
you perceive my thoughts from afar.

³ You discern my going out and my lying down;
you are familiar with all my ways.

⁴ Before a word is on my tongue
you, LORD, know it completely.

⁵ You hem me in behind and before,
and you lay your hand upon me.

⁶ Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,
too lofty for me to attain.

⁷ Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?

⁸ If I go up to the heavens, you are there;
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.

⁹ If I rise on the wings of the dawn,
if I settle on the far side of the sea,

¹⁰ even there your hand will guide me,
your right hand will hold me fast.

¹¹ If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me
and the light become night around me,"

¹² even the darkness will not be dark to you;
the night will shine like the day,

for darkness is as light to you.

¹³ For you created my inmost being;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.

¹⁴*I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful,
I know that full well.*

¹⁵*My frame was not hidden from you
when I was made in the secret place,
when I was woven together in the depths of the earth.*

¹⁶*Your eyes saw my unformed body;
all the days ordained for me were written in your book
before one of them came to be.*

¹⁷*How precious to me are your thoughts, God!
How vast is the sum of them!*

¹⁸*Were I to count them,
they would outnumber the grains of sand—
when I awake, I am still with you.*

Psalm 139:1-18, NIV

Because of God's eternity, He knows you completely. God knows your past; He knows your future. God knows your words before you speak them; He knows your thoughts before you think them; He knows your steps before you take them. These are things God knew before there was time. Now, if the one true, eternal God knows all these things about you, who is your best resource when you have a question about your life? Who should you consult when you don't understand why you do what you do; why you don't do the things you want to do? God is eternal. He made you and me, and His eternity is absolutely necessary for our daily lives and our peace of mind and heart.

God's eternity is the reason God can say with certainty: "'For I know the plans I have for you,' says the LORD. 'They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope. In those days when you pray, I will listen. If you look for me wholeheartedly, you will find me. I will be found by you,' says the LORD" (Jeremiah 29:11-14, NLT).

God's eternity is why we can and should trust Him in every aspect of our lives, the reason we don't need to worry about tonight or tomorrow, the reason we can go boldly into the day and the night with great confidence. When we put our trust in God, we are trusting in and relying on a God who is eternally loving. He enjoys perfect knowledge of the future. We can and should absolutely trust God,

who is in the present and in the future. He said it so simply: “Trust in the LORD with all your heart; do not depend on your own understanding. Seek his will in all you do, and he will show you which path to take” (Proverbs 3:5-6, NLT).

Counting on God for all our tomorrows is obvious because God is not guessing about what will happen tomorrow; He is in tomorrow while holding our hand today. God’s eternity is key to our journey and finding peace and joy in it. Because God is eternal, we can live our lives with purpose, passion, and joy. God is eternal!



Prayer and praise for God’s eternity:

God, You have been our dwelling place in every generation; You have always been and so shall You ever be. When we start to worry about tomorrow, help us to remember You are already there, and where You are, there is an abundance of peace and order and light and everything good. When we are inclined to dwell on our regrets over yesterday, Lord, help us to remember that as we have confessed our sins to You, you have forgiven us and remember our sins no more. God, You are the God of all our yesterdays, all our todays, and all our tomorrows. We rest in You, the unchanging, eternal God who has made great and wonderful promises that You always keep. When we lie down and when we rise up, may it be with our eyes upon You—the one and only eternal God who loves us more than we love ourselves. We pray this in the eternal and matchless name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

CHAPTER 45

GOD IS ALMIGHTY

WITH OUR MOUTHS WE SING, “Our God is an awesome God, He reigns from heaven above with wisdom, power, and love,”⁴⁸ but what do our hearts say about the power of God? Before we go to bed at night, before we rise in the morning, we need to have it settled in our minds that God is omnipotent. There is great comfort and peace in knowing God is all powerful. Knowing you are loved and watched over by Almighty God, who is bigger and more powerful than anything this day can bring, is the source of true joy. When we lie down and when we rise up, we can have confidence that our God has all power—power infinitely greater than the end of the month, rejection by a spouse, the opinions of others, the destruction of cancer, the grip of addiction, and the plans of terrorist who want us dead. God is omnipotent, and His power is greater than all of life’s fiery darts!

The absolute key to a great day is being known and loved by a great God who is almighty in every way. We need to say “good-bye” to fear and worry and say “good morning” to the Lord of all creation, Almighty God!

¹² But the LORD made the earth by his power, and he preserves it by his wisdom. With his own understanding he stretched out the heavens.

¹³ When he speaks in the thunder, the heavens roar with rain. He causes the clouds to rise over the earth. He sends the lightning with the rain and releases the wind from his storehouses. (Jeremiah 10:12-13, NLT)

Every one of us faces challenges on a daily basis. We have way more month than money, a diagnosis that Tylenol will not fix, a spouse who is bound and determined to bring this relationship to the

48 Rich Mullins, “Awesome God,” 1988.

ground, or a child who has wandered far away and we cannot find them. Life is overwhelming to each of us. We are all facing giants that we don't have an answer for, and we are saying to ourselves, "How do I get through this?" If you are facing giants in your life (if you aren't, get ready because they are headed to your house next), if life seems impossible, then we need a fresh knowledge of Almighty God, who specializes in the impossible!

²⁶But Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." (Matthew 19:26)

We live in very challenging times, scary times to be alive on earth. Today is no different from earlier generations. People in every generation have faced challenges just as daunting as we face today. We tend to forget our history lessons and the truths of Scripture. Let's take a quick tour through history and be reminded of God's omnipotence—His unlimited power, Almighty God!

You know about David and Goliath, right? But do you know that David was no different from you? There was nothing super about David. He was not created on a back lot of Hollywood. David was a young boy raised on the farm. He could just as easily have been a young boy raised in a rough section of a large city. The simple truth is, David was just like us. We need to remind ourselves how this played out with David.

He was the younger brother. His father, Jesse, sent him to check on his older brothers who were off at war against the Philistines. They were serving in Saul's army. When David arrived, his brothers immediately began to bully and belittle him. Can't you just imagine how they felt: "We are soldiers, and here our little brother, the sheepherder, has been sent by our father to check on us"? They were quite embarrassed, so they took out their frustrations on David.

When David arrived at the battlefield, he found the Israelites all hiding and he could not understand why. Then David saw the source of their great fear: a mighty Philistine warrior, almost ten feet tall, with a huge sword and armor. This one man was challenging the whole Israelite army. Goliath was standing in the open and roared at the Israelites, "Come out here, you wimps; if there is anybody who is not afraid of me, come out here and fight like a man. Quit hiding in the rocks, and come out and meet me man to man."

David knew God. God had delivered David from lions and bears and many other foes as David shepherded his father's sheep. David

knew from personal experience how mighty and powerful God is, and he knew this Philistine soldier was nothing to God. David reminded his people just who God is:

³²“Don’t worry about this Philistine,” David told Saul. “I’ll go fight him!” ³³“Don’t be ridiculous!” Saul replied. “There’s no way you can fight this Philistine and possibly win! You’re only a boy, and he’s been a man of war since his youth.” ³⁴But David persisted. “I have been taking care of my father’s sheep and goats,” he said. “When a lion or a bear comes to steal a lamb from the flock, ³⁵I go after it with a club and rescue the lamb from its mouth. If the animal turns on me, I catch it by the jaw and club it to death. ³⁶I have done this to both lions and bears, and I’ll do it to this pagan Philistine, too, for he has defied the armies of the living God! ³⁷The LORD who rescued me from the claws of the lion and the bear will rescue me from this Philistine!” (1 Samuel 17:32-37, NLT)

David had spent many nights facing ferocious animals that wanted to kill his father’s sheep. David was just a boy, but he was a boy who knew Yahweh, the one true living God. David knew all things are possible when your hope rests on Almighty God.

³⁷Saul finally consented. “All right, go ahead,” he said. “And may the LORD be with you!” . . . ⁴⁰[David] picked up five smooth stones from a stream and put them into his shepherd’s bag. Then, armed only with his shepherd’s staff and sling, he started across the valley to fight the Philistine. ⁴¹Goliath walked out toward David with his shield bearer ahead of him, ⁴²sneering in contempt at this ruddy-faced boy. ⁴³“Am I a dog,” he roared at David, “that you come at me with a stick?” And he cursed David by the names of his gods. ⁴⁴“Come over here, and I’ll give your flesh to the birds and wild animals!” Goliath yelled. ⁴⁵David replied to the Philistine, “You come to me with sword, spear, and javelin, but I come to you in the name of the LORD of Heaven’s Armies—the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. ⁴⁶Today the LORD will conquer you, and I will kill you and cut off your head. And then I will give the dead bodies of your men to the birds and wild animals, and the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel! ⁴⁷And everyone assembled here will know that the LORD rescues his people, but not with sword and spear. This is the LORD’s battle, and he will give you to us!” ⁴⁸As Goliath moved closer to attack, David quickly ran out to meet him. ⁴⁹Reaching into his shepherd’s bag and taking out a stone, he hurled it with his sling and hit the Philistine in the forehead. The stone sank in, and Goliath stumbled and fell face

down on the ground.⁵⁰ So David triumphed over the Philistine with only a sling and a stone, for he had no sword.⁵¹ Then David ran over and pulled Goliath's sword from its sheath. David used it to kill him and cut off his head. (1 Samuel 17:37, 40-51, NLT)

If you have asked yourself who God is and have answered that He is the Lord, all loving, infinite, eternal, and all powerful, then you are ready to run toward your giant today, knowing that God is in control. He is more powerful than anything you face.

God is not just all powerful, but in Christ, the all-powerful God is fully in us. When we are in Christ, the same Christ (the Holy Spirit of Christ) who is very God of very God resides in us. Here is what God's presence in our lives means to us: "But you belong to God, my dear children. You have already won a victory over those people, because the Spirit who lives in you is greater than the spirit who lives in the world" (1 John 4:4, NLT).

Follow David's example and say to cancer, to debt, to marital issues, to struggles with a child, to someone who seeks to destroy you: "You come at me with this cancer, this financial matter, this marital challenge. You do not know who you are fooling with, dude. I belong to Yahweh. He is all powerful, He is infinite, He is eternal, and He loves me. In fact, He loves me so much that He has adopted me. He gave His own Son for me. So, you may look big, you may feel big, and you may be big by the way the world looks at things; but I am here to tell you, I don't see things as the world sees them. I have the power of God on my side, and today not I but the Lord will conquer you. You are whipped!"

Whatever your circumstances today, the God who brought down the walls of Jericho with a shout, who parted the Red Sea and allowed His people to walk across on dry ground, who declared to Joshua, "Don't worry; I will be right there with you as you lead these million-plus difficult people," and to Stephen, "Don't let these people and their rocks scare you; I am God and beside Me there is no other," He is still God and He is still almighty in every way.

The God who made you and loves you and is with you is El Shaddai—God Almighty. I pray that God would give you and me this vision:

¹⁵ When the servant of the man of God rose early in the morning and went out, behold, an army with horses and chariots was all around the city. And the servant said, "Alas, my master! What shall we do?" ¹⁶ [Elisha] said, "Do not be afraid, for those who are with us are

God Is Almighty

more than those who are with them.”¹⁷ Then Elisha prayed and said, “O LORD, please open his eyes that he may see.” So the LORD opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw, and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. (2 Kings 6:15-17)

May God help us to know who He is. May we know that He who is in us is greater, stronger, and more powerful than he who is in the world. May our eyes be opened to know that the journey before us is one we don’t take alone. We do not go out to face the giants today with only our slingshot but with the power of El Shaddai, God Almighty.



Prayer of thanksgiving and praise and trust in our Almighty God:

Father, we stand at peace in Your presence. We fear nothing because You, the Lord our God, are with us; “your rod and your staff” comfort us (Psalm 23:4). As we face the giants in our lives today, we say, as David did, “You come against us with threats and disease and heartache, but we come against those threats not in our own strength but in the strength of Almighty God who was and is and is to come.” We come into this day of challenges not fearing because greater is He who is in us than he who is in the world. You, O God, are infinitely greater than those things that threaten to take us down today. What a mighty God we serve! We will face this day not in our strength but in the strength of Almighty God. Amen.

CHAPTER 46

GOD IS ALL KNOWING

"Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!"

—Romans 11:33

GOD IS OMNISCIENT; IF SOMETHING is knowable, God knows it. What a blessing it is that our God is so wise; in fact, He is the source and creator of all knowledge. There is no knowledge anywhere except that it arises from Him and is about Him.

¹⁰The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight. (Proverbs 9:10)

⁵Great is our Lord, and abundant in power; his understanding is beyond measure. (Psalm 147:5)

²¹For a man's ways are before the eyes of the LORD, and he ponders all his paths. (Proverbs 5:21)

²You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. ³You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. ⁴Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O LORD, you know it altogether. (Psalm 139:2-4)

The greatest and most powerful computers ever created are simple toys compared to the human brain. Despite all our technology, the intricacies of the human body are far beyond the understanding of medical science. God created the human body and the brain that directs and controls it; He spoke it all into existence. God is omniscient, and there is no limit to His knowledge.

What does it mean to us today that our God knows all things? God's perfect knowledge of all things is meaningful and practical to each of our lives right now. Begin with this thought: God knows you completely, much better than any parent, spouse, MRI device, or doctor; God knows your days and has a perfect plan for your life; God's perfect plan for your life includes and incorporates every relevant fact of your life today. Hey, when we realize this, we have one clear response to our challenges, and it is what God calls us to here: "Be still, and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10).

God is not just all knowing; He is also all generous and wants to share His wisdom with His children. He is looking for opportunities to share His wisdom; our job is simply to ask. Solomon, a person just like us, prayed for wisdom, and God gave Solomon great wisdom. He wants to do the same for you and me.

⁵If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. (James 1:5)

Every problem we face God has already solved. That is right, the very thing you are anxious about, God has already solved the puzzle and put the pieces together on the board of your life. We don't have problems God cannot solve; we have problems we don't trust God to solve. The problem is not God's knowledge; the problem is we are too busy and too sophisticated to simply ask Him to help us.

We must grow out of our fear and our failure to fully lean on and trust our all-knowing God with all things, large and small. Don't be afraid to say, "Lord, show me where my keys are . . . what do I need to say to this person? . . . help me with my math problem by giving me clarity of mind so I might use this wonderful instrument you have given me that we call a brain." "I just don't know what I should do!" "I don't know what the next step is; I just don't know what to do now." "There are so many things I have gotten wrong; I wish I knew how to live better, how to live life victoriously." There is no limit to the statements we could plug in here to demonstrate how each of us faces challenging moments when we do not know what the next best step is. This should not be—our all-knowing God is an all-loving Father and wants us to simply say, "Father, help me."

God knows all things, and He wants us to know everything we need to know. God loves you more than you love yourself. In Christ, God has adopted you into His family; He is your Father. Whatever

problem you face today, God is the answer, the very best answer for you. We are not waiting on God; He is waiting on you and me.

¹¹ If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him! (Matthew 7:11)

The question is not whether God is willing to give you good gifts, the question is not whether God is able to give you good gifts, and the question is not whether God knows what you need. The question is: Do we know God well enough to realize that He knows all things? He is waiting to hear and answer our questions and our prayers.

²⁶ Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. ²⁷ And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. ²⁸ And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:26-28)

¹⁴ I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. (John 10:14-15)

²⁵ At that time Jesus declared, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; ²⁶ yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. ²⁷ All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. ²⁸ Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11:25-30)

To know God, who knows all, is to know that all will be well today. I know of no greater peace and joy than to know God and know He is aware of and able to handle whatever comes our way today. When we think of God and we reflect that He knows all things, we are strengthened and encouraged.

² I want them to be encouraged and knit together by strong ties of love. I want them to have complete confidence that they understand God’s mysterious plan, which is Christ himself. ³ In him lie hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. (Colossians 2:2-3, NLT)

God Is All Knowing

³⁰For all the nations of the world seek after these things, and your Father knows that you need them. ³¹Instead, seek his kingdom, and these things will be added to you. (Luke 12:30-31)



Prayer recognizing that God knows all things:

Father, we are so excited to have a Father who knows everything. Lord, there is nothing You do not know. You know the very hairs on each of our heads, You know the number of grains of sand on all the beaches of all the bodies of water throughout the world. You know where our car keys are, You know where our children are, You know the test results before the test is taken, You know all things, and You love us and care for us and have a plan for us that is wonderful. Father, we rest in Your knowledge. We confess there is so much we don't know, but what we do know is that You, O Lord, are the source of all knowledge, and we trust in You completely. Right now we ask You to help us rest in You, the all-knowing God who loves us and cares for us. We don't have to wonder what is around the next curve or over the next hill because the God who loves us knows all these things, and we rest in Your knowledge. God, we trust and rest in You. Amen.

CHAPTER 47

GOD IS OMNIPRESENT

WHERE ARE YOU, GOD? I need You, God! God, please answer. Come to me, God.

“He is here, hallelujah! He is here, amen! You will never be the same.”⁴⁹

When the storms of life are raging—finances, family, marriage, illness, job, children, grandchildren, neighbors, prison, addiction, depression, desperation—we want to know, “Where is God?” I need to know right this very moment, in this hour of tribulation, “Where is God?” When we learn that our life has just taken a tragic turn and we have no idea how to even draw our next breath, there is nothing more important to know than “Where is God right now?”

¹Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. ²When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. ³For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. (Isaiah 43:1-3)

When I was a child, our phone system went through a local operator in downtown Meadville: Mrs. Guice. I think we had a number like twenty-five or something, but you didn’t really use numbers; it was all names, and Mrs. Guice generally knew where everyone was at any given point in time. When I was about five or six years old, a telephone conversation in our little local phone system went something like this: I pick up the phone (no dial on it) and say these words: “Do

⁴⁹ “He Is Here,” performed by the Gaither Vocal Band, written by L. Kirk Talley, 1992.

you know where my mama is?" The voice, Mrs. Guice, would answer with something along these lines: "Your mother was at Faye's Beauty Shop, but I think she left there. She might be at Aldridge Meat Market because I know she and your daddy have company coming tonight." If I am exaggerating any, it's by precious little. We knew where our parents were (and presumably they kept up with us in the same fashion), and that was comforting. Yet it is infinitely more important and comforting to know where God is—to know that no matter how bad things are going, you can know right where He is and be able to absolutely count on His presence!

The most beautiful and empowering knowledge we can have is simply this: God is here; He is not going anywhere. God is not just here, but He is here with a plan for your life—a plan to bless you and care for you and prosper you. God is omnipresent, and He is bigger than whatever is going on in your life. God is never caught off guard, and no challenge ever overcomes His provision, His love, His peace, and His plan for you.

When hard times hit, it is so important to have friends and family close by. Yet, no matter how much comfort a family member or a friend might be to us, there is no presence like the presence of God. No matter how close we are to another person, no matter how much or how well we connect with them, there are things they cannot know, cannot do for us or with us, and there are needs they are not capable of addressing—they are not even made to address those needs. God alone is able. God knows you intimately! He loves and cares for you more than you love yourself. "God, I know You love me so much; I just wish You were here, God!" Well, hallelujah, He is here!

⁶Be strong and courageous. Do not fear or be in dread of them, for it is the LORD your God who goes with you. He will not leave you or forsake you. (Deuteronomy 31:6)

God, who created everything, who is all loving, all powerful, and all knowing, is right here with you! Lord, have mercy; what a profoundly amazing and transforming truth. When we wrap our minds around the truth of God's presence and embrace His promises to be with us and never leave us, we will never be the same. We will no longer be overwhelmed by our fears, anxieties, and worries; the knowledge of the presence of God transforms us into bold, peaceful, strong, and effective children of the Most High God who is, hallelujah, right here with us.

In Christ, we are new creations. But most of us are not living out all that we are in Christ. We all struggle, to one degree or another, to fully embrace all we are and all we have in our relationship in Christ Jesus. No truth is more liberating and empowering than the truth of the very presence of the very God with you right now, right where you are! To know God's presence in this real, practical, personal manner is absolutely life changing—we should never be the same again. God is here! I never need to fear, feel lonely, feel left out, feel unloved again—God is here!

So, when the worst possible news comes—when the test results are cancer; when depression hits like a ton of bricks on our chest; when the one we thought we could count on the most says, “I want a divorce, I don’t love you anymore”; even when someone comes to the door to deliver the most devastating news—God is present. He says, “I will not leave you; I will not forsake you; I will be with you always!” We may be so devastated we cannot raise our head, but we can raise our hearts because, hallelujah, the God who created the Milky Way, who parted the Red Sea, who put Mount Everest in place, who sent His Son Jesus to die in my place, in your place—He is here, He loves you, and He is not leaving. To know God is present is to live life in the way God intended, sweeter and more beautiful than we ever imagined.

Who do I say God is? God is here! God is with me! When you and I embrace this simple fact—God is omnipresent—it’s a game changer, a life transformer, the source of true peace and strength in even the worst of life’s storms. God tells us many times in Scripture that life comes with difficulties. The truth is, those difficulties are ultimately for our benefit. We know that, but we think, “Lord, I know You are helping me by using this (fill in the blank) circumstance to shape me into the person I need to be. But, Lord, I am so afraid and so alone. Please help me, God!” He has answered, and He has said, “‘I will never fail you. I will never abandon you.’⁵ So we can say with confidence, ‘The LORD is my helper, so I will have no fear. What can mere people do to me?’” (Hebrews 13:5-6, NLT).

When we know that God is here, we know—no matter what—it is well with our soul. In fact, we are way better than okay; we are good, strong, determined, and focused. We are facing life with purpose and passion. We can rejoice in the midst of life’s most difficult moments (hours, days, years) because the Lord is with us.

⁵Just as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you or forsake you. (Joshua 1:5)

God Is Omnipresent

God is with you no matter what. When life hits you in the face (and it will), you can say, as was written by a man many years ago, "It is well with my soul." Many of us have read about the triumph-from-tragedy story of Horatio G. Spafford. He was a Chicago lawyer living in the mid-1800s. He lost most of his assets, his son, and his four daughters. Following those unbelievable tragedies, he was yet able to pen these words:

It Is Well with My Soul⁵⁰

*When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,
It is well, it is well with my soul.*

REFRAIN

*It is well, with my soul,
It is well, with my soul,
It is well, it is well, with my soul.*

*Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come,
Let this blest assurance control,
That Christ hath regarded my helpless estate,
And hath shed His own blood for my soul.*

REFRAIN

*My sin, oh the bliss of this glorious thought!
My sin, not in part but the whole,
Is nailed to His cross, and I bear it no more,
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!*

REFRAIN

*For me, be it Christ, be it Christ hence to live:
If Jordan above me shall roll,
No pang shall be mine, for in death as in life
Thou wilt whisper Thy peace to my soul.*

50 "It Is Well with My Soul," Horatio Spafford, 1873.

REFRAIN

*And Lord haste the day, when my faith shall be sight,
The clouds be rolled back as a scroll;
The trump shall resound, and the Lord shall descend,
Even so, it is well with my soul.*

REFRAIN

⁶Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:6-7)

When we have the right picture of God, the picture of who God is and where God is, we can know He is not a God far away, He is not a God who looks at us from a distant place. Instead, He is a God who is right here with us! We can sit by the bed of our loved one, we can pass through the valley of the shadow of death, we can face the finances that don't get us to the end of the month, we can know that even though he or she is leaving, even though the child is far from where we want and would have them to be—in the midst of all these tragedies, we are not alone, we do not have to despair, for the Lord our God is with us. He will not leave us, and so it is well with our soul. Praise be to God forever and ever.

As God was to Moses, as God was to Joshua:

⁵No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life. Just as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you or forsake you. ⁶Be strong and courageous, for you shall cause this people to inherit the land that I swore to their fathers to give them. ⁷Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to do according to all the law that Moses my servant commanded you. Do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may have good success wherever you go. ⁸This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success. ⁹Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go. (Joshua 1:5-9)

God Is Omnipresent

So is God with you and me and all who are in Christ. He is here, hallelujah; He is here, amen.

Prayer to acknowledge God's presence in our life:

Lord, today life is knocking us down. We don't know what to do. We don't have the answers. Lord, we don't even know the right questions. We have never been here, and we are afraid. Help us, Lord, to remember right now that You are not a God far away. You are God right here. You are with us, and it is well with our soul. You are with us, Lord, and even if the day gets worse, You are not leaving. You have promised never to leave us. Because You are here, Lord, we can get through this day. We thank You, Lord, for Your presence with us and Your promise to never leave us. Lord, help us to know that Your presence with us is not based on how we feel. I don't have to feel You; I just have to know You are God, You are here, and You are not going anywhere. Amen.

CHAPTER 48

GOD IS MERCIFUL

"The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. 'The LORD is my portion,' says my soul, 'therefore I will hope in him.'"

—Lamentations 3:22-24

GOD IS A MERCIFUL GOD. When we wake up each morning, God's mercy for you and for me is fresh and new for this new day in which we now live. We need mercy for today, and that is exactly what our merciful God meets us with. As with each of God's attributes, God's mercy is just what we need, right when we need it.

We all have events and circumstances in our lives that we would rather no one ever find out about. There are thoughts, words, and actions that we wish had never occurred. We cannot imagine God loving us if He really knew all that we know about our own lives and our motives. When I am really honest about who I am, what I have done, and what I have failed to do, my initial reaction is fear of God's punishment and judgment falling on me at any moment. I know I do not deserve to live; I know I deserve God's harshest judgment for the sin in my life.

Then I remember mercy! Through God's mercy we are not consumed; His mercy is new every morning. We love mercy, don't we? Mercy is when we don't get what we deserve. A mother once came to the Emperor Napoleon to plead for mercy for her son who had been sentenced to die. Napoleon responded that her son did not deserve

mercy. She said, "Sir, if he deserved it, it would not be mercy." Mercy is God not giving us the punishment we deserve for our sin against Him.

Returning to our hidden sin that we believe puts us just out of reach of forgiveness by a God who is holy and just, we think, "If God really knew who I am, there is no way He would ever forgive me; if God really knew me, His judgment would fall upon me with a vengeance. I have done things that God could never forgive." We read and hear over and over how God is a God of justice. How could a God of justice be merciful to me if He really knew me? Would God, could God really forgive me and not punish me for that sin I would never dare tell anyone, that sin so bad I don't even talk to myself about it? Is a just God able to show mercy to me for even my deepest sins?

One of the things we have to know about God is that God's justice is completely comfortable with God's mercy. God's mercy is completely at ease with God's holiness. This is who God is. God is not like us in our fickle way of being one way today and different tomorrow. We have moments when we feel forgiving and loving, but we also have moments when we feel like we are ready for some justice and "people are not going to enjoy that." Those are our feelings in the moment. God does not feel merciful; we are not speaking here of God's feelings—we are looking at *who God is!* God is merciful!

It must be said and clearly understood that God does not and cannot choose to just ignore our sin. God does not and cannot forgive our sin without payment. The payment for our sin, the foundation of God's mercy extended to us, is the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. While we were still in our sin, Christ died for us (see Romans 5:8). So God's mercy is not a winking at sin; it is the one sacrifice that paid for all sin for all time.

God's mercy is based solely on the finished work of Jesus. How can we ever cease to praise Him who knew no sin but who became sin that we might become the righteousness of God in Christ Jesus? How can we not love and serve Him who died that we might receive mercy we could never deserve because Jesus willingly took on our punishment for our sin, which He did not and could not deserve—Him being without sin and perfect in every way?

³Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,⁴ to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in

heaven for you,⁵ who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. (1 Peter 1:3-5)

An MRI of God (if there was such a thing) would reveal that, through and through, God is merciful (as well as loving, just, holy, eternal, infinite, all knowing, all powerful). Mercy is not something God does; it is who God is. Each and every one of God's attributes work together in perfect synchronization. He is not a just God on Mondays and a merciful God on Tuesdays. We do not have to think, "I'd better get this prayer done on God's mercy day." No! God is who He is, and He never changes (this is another attribute addressed in an upcoming chapter). God is completely just while being completely merciful and loving and gracious and fair and kind in all that He is and all that He does.

What does God's mercy mean for me? What is God's mercy, and how does it apply to my life? Isn't God tired of being merciful to me? He did that for me yesterday, but I don't think He is going to be inclined to be merciful to me again today, right? Wrong. We have to, as much as we can, come to understand God and His mercy as He interacts with our lives. His mercies are new every morning for me and for you.

God has told us we are not to continue in sin. In fact, He has warned us that no one who has been born again, who is truly in Christ, will keep on sinning as the regular course of their life. Yet He also recognizes that as we seek Him, by His grace, we will fall down daily. That is why He said,

⁴Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. ⁵You know that he appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. ⁶No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him. ⁷Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous. ⁸Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. ⁹No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God. ¹⁰By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother. (1 John 3:4-10)

From Scripture, from experiences in life, from living and falling on my face, here is my appreciation of how God interacts with His

children: to be in Christ is to be born again; it means old things have passed away and all things have become new—spiritually. But we still live inside the same old “house,” and that “house,” our flesh and its desires, will battle with us daily as long as we are wearing these human suits. In my life, there has never been a day, maybe not an hour, when I could say that there was not a word, a thought, or a deed that missed the mark (sin). So, my life, by the mercy and grace of God alone, is on a higher plane; I no longer sin as the regular course of my being, but I do sin regularly, daily in either my thoughts, words, or actions.

We are all hopeless apart from the finished work of Christ. In Christ, the course of our life is toward Him and away from the old way, and we say, by the grace of God, “I am not who I want to be, but I am ahead of where I used to be.” The course of my life today is led by the Spirit, but every day, in one way or another, the flesh wins a temporary skirmish and I say, think, or do things I should not. So I am much in need of God’s mercy—that is, for God not to give me what I deserve (eternal death right now) but instead to give me what I don’t deserve (His grace), which is forgiveness that is fully accomplished by and in Christ. I have just told you what I think. If it deviates from the entire counsel of Scripture in any way, then it is not from God and you should absolutely reject what anyone says (including me) that departs from the whole truth of God found in His Holy Word, the Bible.

So, we need to know God has called us out of sin into righteousness. But the righteousness that allows us to come to God is not my righteous acts but the finished work of Christ. Here is one place we read this truth:

¹ My dear children, I am writing this to you so that you will not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate who pleads our case before the Father. He is Jesus Christ, the one who is truly righteous.
² He himself is the sacrifice that atones for our sins—and not only our sins but the sins of all the world. (1 John 2:1-2, NLT)

We have to acknowledge our complete dependence upon God every single moment of every single day. In 1 John we also read this:

⁵ This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. ⁶If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. ⁷But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. ⁸If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is

not in us.⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.¹⁰ If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. (1 John 1:5-10)

Yes, you can count on God's mercy. His mercy is fresh and new this morning and every morning. Your sins and my sins have been fully paid for. That work was done by Christ, who proclaimed from the cross that He had finished His work of paying for our sins—Paid in Full!⁵¹

God is a merciful God, and those mercies extend to all who are in Christ Jesus. There is no other way, but we need no other way because we have God's promise: "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Because God is merciful, we do not drag a past full of failures along behind us. Today, in Christ, we stand before God clothed with the righteousness of Christ. We are His children. The mercy of God is at work in our lives. It is so important for us to have sound and true thoughts when we think of who God is. We can know with assurance that God is a merciful God.



Prayer thanking God for His mercy:

Father, you are a merciful God. You do not give us what we deserve; instead, You show mercy to us every day. You promise us that Your mercy is never ending; it is new to us, in Christ Jesus, every morning. Father, we thank You that our standing with You is not measured by what we have done but by what Christ has done for us. Christ has graciously enabled us, as we fully trust in and rely on Him, to stand in the shower of Your mercy, which is without measure. Thank You, Father, for Your mercy in our lives today and every day. Amen.

51 On the cross Jesus said, "It is finished" (John 19:30). I have read and understand this to mean He finished paying for my sin and yours—paid in full.

CHAPTER 49

GOD IS JUST

GOD IS A JUST GOD in every way. He is just in how He treats us. He is just in how He treats sin. Just is a part of who God is every bit as much as His holiness, His power, and His mercy. God must be just; anything less and He would not in fact be God. God as a just God is Him always treating us justly; it is Him having Christ pay the price for justice by dying in our place; it is Him not turning a blind eye to sin but requiring it be paid for in full. God is a just God in every way.

Sometimes we might think, “Oh, God has been so loving; He is probably ready to bring His justice down on me by now.” Each of God’s attributes is completely consistent with all of His other attributes. God’s justice does not have to give way to God’s mercy or love. God’s justice and God’s love are not two opposing forces; they are one. God is completely just. God is completely loving. God’s loving justice is infinite and unchanging.

What does “God is just” mean in your life today? It means we need to relax and let go of the idea that we have to find a way to get over God’s bar of justice—we can’t, we never could. Jesus did that for us.

⁶For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— ⁸but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. ⁹Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. ¹⁰For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. ¹¹More than that, we also rejoice in God through

our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation. (Romans 5:6-11)

We need to live our lives with an acute awareness that God hates sin and understand why! Sin cost Jesus! Sin is not something God can just sweep under the rug or wink at, saying “Oh, I love you; it’ll be okay.” It will not be okay; God hates sin. God is holy and can in no way ignore sin.

²³For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 6:23)

God created us for the express purpose of being in relationship with Him, honoring and glorifying Him in our lives. But we have all sinned, and God, as a completely holy God, can have nothing to do with sin. Because God is just, there has to be a way to deal with our sin, a way for us to be reconciled to God. God’s justice and love are in perfect harmony—God cannot be loving without being just, and for God to be just, sin has to be paid for.

²¹But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—

²²the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: ²³for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. ²⁶It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. (Romans 3:21-26)

As the hymn says, “Jesus paid it all, all to Him I owe; sin had left a crimson stain, He washed it white as snow.”⁵² God is holy and hates sin; He sent His Son to die for our sins. We need to know that God’s justice is a really big deal.

Never make light of sin! Sin is not a big deal; sin is a huge deal. Sin is a huge deal because it is completely contrary to God. Sin is vile darkness, and God is justice and light; the two have nothing in common and are in fact direct opposites. God is opposed to sin in any size, shape, form, or fashion.

The world around us is screaming out the words of Bob Dylan’s prophetic sixties hit “The Times They Are a Changin’.” Some claim the

52 Elvina M. Hall, “Jesus Paid It All,” 1865.

world is changing, but a review of history reveals nothing has really changed. Sin is no different today than thousands of years ago. Society will not and cannot exist long enough to change God's mind about sin. It is foolishness for us to say today, "Well, we live in a modern society, and it has changed the way we look at things." No doubt, it is true that society has changed its views on things. *But God has not changed!* God cannot change. God is just. God hates sin. God sent His only Son to die to pay for sin. God's justice is as much a part of who God is as His love is an essential part of God.

We have to look at God's justice this way: I am a sinner; God can have nothing to do with sin; I have to acknowledge my sin and trust in Christ because that is the only way my sin is covered—through Jesus' perfect full and final payment for my sin and yours. If I pretend to be somehow above sin or exempt from its effects, I am a liar and have no place at God's table.

⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰ If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. ¹ My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. ² He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. (1 John 1:9-10, 2:1-2)

"For God so loved the world" (John 3:16)—you and me—so we need to, in fact we must, embrace God's love but also His justice. We need to live with an awareness of how God sees sin and how He must deal with sin. God is a just God—all the time, for all time.

†

Prayer acknowledging God as a just God:

Father, you are a holy God and have nothing to do with sin. You sent Your Son to die for our sins. You have called us out of sin into the light of Your righteousness. Lord, may we never pretend that sin is okay; it is not okay. It is against You that we sin. May we all see sin for what it is—absolutely vile and offensive to God—then turn from it, repent of it, and walk in the light of Your Word. You are a just God, and we thank You for atoning for our sins through Jesus. May we live our lives with the full knowledge that Jesus paid it all; all to Him we owe. We acknowledge that sin debt, and we give eternal thanks to You, Lord, for Your mercy today and always. Amen.

CHAPTER 50

GOD IS GRACIOUS

*Amazing grace! how sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.*

*'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed!*

*Thro' many dangers, toils and snares,
I have already come;
'Tis grace hath bro't me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.*

*The Lord has promised good to me,
His Word my hope secures;
He will my shield and portion be
As long as life endures.*

*When we've been there ten thousand years,
Bright shining as the sun,
We've no less days to sing God's praise
Than when we first begun.⁵³*

53 John Newton, "Amazing Grace," 1779; *Logos Hymnal*, 1st ed. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1995).

This most famous of hymns was written in 1772, probably as a prayer, by a born-again slave trader named John Newton. It is solid theology and experientially tells the story of all who are in Christ—who have been born again. I identify with each and every word. It tells us of grace, the amazing grace of God that is a part of who our heavenly Father is.

Grace is absolutely key to our daily lives in many ways. Nowhere does God's grace appear more prominently and providentially than here: "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God" (Ephesians 2:8).

Grace is the most precious substance of which I know. Grace is the precious gift of God reaching down the hand of a King to a hopeless beggar like me, who is utterly hopeless apart from the saving grace of God.

God is a gracious God, and if this is all we ever knew of God, it is sufficient to fuel an unending hymn of praise from all who taste of Him who is grace without measure—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

God is a God of grace! His grace amazes anyone and everyone who is living in it. Yes, we live in grace—God's unmerited favor⁵⁴—bestowed upon us bountifully day by day. When we awakened this morning, that was God's grace. When we draw in a breath of air, that is God's grace. When we lie down and when we get up, when we move and when we are still, when we breathe and when we cease to breathe—each and all of these represent God's grace.

¹⁶ For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. (John 1:16)

Look at that same verse from the Amplified Bible⁵⁵:

¹⁶ For out of His fullness [the superabundance of His grace and truth] we have all received grace upon grace [spiritual blessing upon spiritual blessing, favor upon favor, and gift heaped upon gift]. (John 1:16, AMP)

Each one of God's attributes is the very essence of God, and they are all needed for our daily lives. While I know we need each one of God's attributes, I say without hesitation that God's grace ministers to me personally in a deep and profound way that seems to equal all of the other attributes combined. God's grace is present in every aspect of

⁵⁴ There are many efforts to define *grace*—about as successfully as we can describe and define God Himself. This definition, source unknown, is about as good as any.

⁵⁵ The Amplified Bible is just what it says—it is an amplification or expansion upon the original language. As we have many words that have multiple meanings, the Amplified simply gives you the full feeling and meaning of the word as used in the original text.

our lives; we are standing in God's grace, and we are awash in waves of grace. Thanks be to God, who is gracious without measure.

How does God's grace change how we look at and maneuver through a typical day? When we are blind to God's grace, it is just an undercover angel of sorts who is at work in our lives, and we are blissfully ignorant of it. But when we wake up to God's presence and the fullness of who God is, His grace comes to us out of everything the day brings. I am writing this paragraph sitting outside on an early spring morning in Ocean Springs, Mississippi, and the clover and the leaves are swaying in the breeze, doves are cooing, other birds are singing, and the sun's dappled rays are passing through the live oaks as the squirrels run to and fro. God's grace is blessing my skin, eyes, and ears.

Grace is sweet to the ear and a blessing to the soul. How does grace impact your daily life? Well, you cannot taste grace, you cannot see or hold grace, yet grace is sweeter to the taste than the richest of chocolate; grace feels better than the finest linen on your body; you may not hold grace, but grace holds you and me through the worst of times. How sweet is the sound of God's grace in our lives?

God's grace sounds mighty sweet in our salvation:

⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹not a result of works, so that no one may boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

God's grace is sweet when we know we have been redeemed by grace:

²²For there is no distinction: ²³for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. (Romans 3:22-25)

God's grace is how we stand, how we keep from falling, and how we have and occupy the place we enjoy in life. It is not just about standing but about everything we experience in our present life including breath, heartbeat, thoughts, words . . .

¹Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. ²Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. (Romans 5:1-2)

God's grace sounds especially sweet in the face of my daily failures, which are more appropriately called sin:

²⁰ Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more,²¹ so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. (Romans 5:20-21)

When you face the challenges of life today, remember it is also God's grace that allows this challenge to come; it is God's grace that empowers you to work through the challenge; and it is God's grace that keeps the challenge from being more than you can handle.

⁷ So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.

⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me.⁹ But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. (2 Corinthians 12:7-9)

Here is verse 9 in the Amplified:

⁹ But He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you [My lovingkindness and My mercy are more than enough—always available—regardless of the situation]; for [My] power is being perfected [and is completed and shows itself most effectively] in [your] weakness." Therefore, I will all the more gladly boast in my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ [may completely enfold me and] may dwell in me. (2 Corinthians 12:9, AMP)

Tragically we often find ourselves resisting God's grace. We resist God's grace when we try to demonstrate we can do life on our own. We just naturally want to take charge of and receive recognition for our transformation, so we resist grace. We want to be strong. We want to be heroes. Grace says, "You cannot even draw breath without God acting in and through His grace." God is saying, "Whatever you are facing, you cannot get through it, you just can't do it without Me." But He then goes on to assure us, "My grace is sufficient." He is saying, "You can't, but I can—and so you can in Me and through Me, by grace."

Every hour of every day we stand in complete dependence upon the grace of God. We are as dependent upon God's grace as a child in the womb is dependent in every way upon the mother. God's grace is giving us light and breath and sustenance for our bodies, souls, and

spirits. Grace is God's daily manna given into our lives from above. We have never seen such a substance before, but it is the sweetest thing we will ever know and upon grace we depend.

The hymn "Amazing Grace" does in itself teach us profound lessons about God's grace. I am not speaking of the words or the story but the circumstances that gave rise to its being written. How many men, women, and children suffered and died at the hands of John Newton and his employers before God's grace brought Newton to salvation and the penning of this wonderful hymn.⁵⁶ God's grace is at work through very difficult circumstances to lead us to a place of awakening to God's goodness and our deep sin. Grace is good no matter what form it takes because God is its source and its dispenser, and the purpose and end of grace is our reconciliation with God. I have no explanation for this except to say as God has said:

⁸ For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. ⁹ For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. (Isaiah 55:8-9)

God's grace in my life has been abundant. One act of God's grace in my life came through a comment by a fellow Christian about my character. I was wounded, deeply offended, and just incensed at the lack of real perception by this sister in Christ. The truth is, she was far too gentle and should have hit me twice as hard.⁵⁷ She commented on my pride, and God knew I respected her and that He could, by that act of grace, bring me to see a deep sin in my life—pride. Pride, by my understanding and experience, is the single most destructive sin. Pride is a complete anti-God state of mind. Pride says, "I am good, and God is lucky to have me on His team." I wish I could claim that one act of God's grace relieved me of pride, but it did not. However, God did use that comment to awaken me to the reality and depth of pride in my life. Since then God has continued to try to show me the depth of this sin in my life. Day by day He is chipping away at me, and each blow of His sculptor's tool is an act of God's grace. I thank God for His grace.

Grace often hits us with blows much more devastating than a little touch to our ego. There are times in everyone's life when life

56 Vocal artist Wintley Phipps supposes, with good reason, the melody for "Amazing Grace" came from the very people John Newton once abused before encountering the grace of God.

57 Proverbs 27:6 says, "Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy."

circumstances hit us so hard we do not believe we can even draw another breath. This is hard, but even in the midst of life's most devastating events, the grace of God is at work. Grace is a part of God, God loves you, God is in control—so grace is a part of every challenge we face in life. The grace part of life's challenges is often visible only when viewed in our rearview mirror after the storm has passed.

Here is what we can know, and this is a perfect example of why it is so important to know who God is: When God allows a devastating event to take place and we want to cry out, "Why, God? Why me, God? Why now, God?" it is crucial to know who God is.

- God is holy.
- God is all loving.
- God is all powerful.
- God is present.
- God is merciful.
- God is just.
- God is gracious in all things.

Here's a warning against us trying to make God look better: It is deeply troubling and often just adds more hurt when people come running into the middle of a tragedy and try to tell the hurting person why the tragedy occurred. That is wrong. We don't know why certain events happen. We are not in the place of God. But there are some things we can know, and they are good to share at the right time (only the Holy Spirit can guide us to the right time): "This tragedy does not change God's loving presence, His gracious provision, or His perfect plan for your life. God's grace is sufficient. These things we know, and we cling to these truths in the storm." We can gently point others to the ultimate grace of God in the person of Christ, whom they can anchor to in the storm.

I can look back on many disasters and see God's grace at work: in bringing me and others through the calamity; in strengthening us for what would follow; in showing Himself strong in the midst of our weakest moment; in calling us to seek Him more than ever; and in bringing people into the kingdom, people into prayer, and people to a place where they had to make decisions that would impact people and families for generations to come. I rarely have the sense of what God is doing at the moment, but I know—and we can all know—God is at

God Is Gracious

work and that we can trust Him in the midst of life's most devastating storms. He is a good, good Father, and He is perfect in all of His ways. God is a gracious God at all times, in all things, for all things, for you and for me.



Prayer acknowledging God's grace:

Father, thank You for the grace in which we now stand. Lord, help us to know that Your grace is the key to our salvation, but it is also the key to our very next breath, to our being able to love You, to love our neighbor, to think right thoughts, to speak right words, to take right actions and avoid wrong ones. Lord, Your grace amazes each of us. We thank You, Lord, for being gracious to us without limit. We confess right here and now, it is only by Your grace that we can even pray this feeble prayer. Lord, graciously lead us into a deeper awareness of the beauty and fullness of Your grace and our full dependence upon Your grace. May we come to the point in our lives, even now, that one drop of Your grace fully received by us is more exquisite than anything this earth has to offer. Thank You, Lord, for grace. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

CHAPTER 51

GOD IS SOVEREIGN

GOD IS OVER ALL; GOD can and will do all that He wills to do. There is no one and no thing over God. God is in control. God's sovereignty should be the most reassuring of God's many attributes. When the world and life in general make no sense, we can find deep comfort and peace in the fact that God, who is love and light and mercy and grace and perfect in all His ways, is also sovereign—absolutely in control. When we know God is in charge, we know peace. God—not the president, not congress, not a political party, not any one or more terrorist groups—is in charge. Nothing happens in this world that is beyond God's ultimate control.

We should not be angry or put off when non-Christians say things like, "If God allowed (fill in the blank) to happen, I want nothing to do with God." The things of God do not make sense to the mind of one who is dead in trespasses and sin (as every one of us was before God's grace reached us). On the other hand, the Body of Christ has to embrace God's sovereignty. I do not claim we will always understand why things happen; we will not. There are events recounted in the Bible I do not understand or enjoy reading about, and there are things happening every day I do not understand. Yet, I can say, "The God who created the heavens and the earth, who sent His Son to die for me, is sovereign, and I don't have to always understand Him to love, trust, and obey Him."

If I understood everything God caused or allowed, He would not be God. The truth is, I trust Him even more for the very reason that He is God and His ways are above my ways. The reality of life's difficult events is why (a) it is of ultimate importance that a person be born again

spiritually so that spiritual things can be understood and enjoyed; and (b) we have to know God fully so we can trust Him completely in all things and at all times, especially in the midst of the storm.

Parents do things for their children that, to the child, seem anything but loving. The child does not have the same vision the parent has; the child can only see their immediate circumstances, and they do not understand the full implication of certain choices and actions by the parents. The parents are acting with a much deeper knowledge of what is needed. On a much higher level of both love and knowledge, God permits the free will of others to act for our good in ways that we do not understand. Our honest thoughts are “God has abandoned us. God does not love us. God is not a good God.” Yet, like children, we cannot see what God sees.

²⁸ And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28)

We should never attempt to explain away God’s actions and inactions in difficult circumstances. We are not in the place of God. We do not have His perspective. We do not know all that is going on; in fact, we know very little. In my opinion, and this is just my opinion, in the vast majority of tragedies, our responsibility is to love and quietly support those in pain. It is not our job to tell them what God is doing or why something is happening. What we can—and I believe should—do is simply stand on God’s love and His presence and say to others, “I don’t understand this tragedy, but what we do know is God loves you and He has promised never to leave you. Rest in Him and look to Him. He is the answer.”

What I think does not matter, but what does matter is this: God is sovereign—He is in control. God is love. God is light. God is gracious. God is almighty. God is holy. God is all knowing. We do not have to understand the things God allows to happen, but we can know at the deepest level of our soul that whatever happens has happened under the loving watch of the one and only true and sovereign God. We can always trust Him and know that He knows more than us; He has a plan, and His plan, whether we can see it or not, is a perfect plan.

Some will say, “I don’t trust God, and I don’t even believe in God.” We have to know one of two things: (1) God is God, and I can trust Him; or (2) there is no God and it is all just chance, and it doesn’t matter because we are here for a few moments and then we go away

forever. You do not have to accept my thoughts, but I can say with absolute assurance: I know that I know that I know that God is who He says and does what He promises. I know this because He has said this, and God always, always, always does what He says. I also know God's sovereignty because I have lived this—thanks be to God.

Here is what God has said through David about God's involvement in your life and my life:

¹³ For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. ¹⁴ I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. ¹⁵ My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. ¹⁶ Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them. (Psalm 139:13-16)

God formed us and made us just as He wants us to be. We were perfectly placed in time, place, personality, and life circumstances to be used by God for His purposes. Our goal is to bring glory and honor to God as we are transformed into the likeness of Christ Jesus. Our life circumstances are a part of God's sovereignty and His plan, and life's events are moving toward that end.

Some would say that such thoughts about God's sovereignty and His placement of each of us are either blind faith or gross ignorance. I am not upset about those who put me down for my beliefs as a Christian. I have a personal love relationship with the Creator of this universe. He loves me so much that His Son died in my place and now represents me before God the Father in heaven, pleading my case. I have personally experienced and daily continue to personally experience wonderful love and contact with the Creator; by His grace I daily feel His very real presence and counsel in every area of my life. God's sovereignty does not work against my faith; it strengthens and grows my faith. That same God who gives me faith and grows my faith is also the one who allows me to love the very person who would speak down to me for my faith.

I am comfortable with my faith. I do not know the comfort level of those who criticize the faith of Christians but would gently say, "It seems to me the more difficult faith challenge is to believe that at some point in time a billion or so years ago nothing created something that is now the human body with all its intricacies; that the universe that

works in perfect order just happened from that nothing; that a red rose came from that nothing; that an Alaskan salmon came from that same nothing and shall return to that nothing.” I am not offended that the person who believes that also believes I am either stupid or clueless. I absolutely love and pray for that person, and I want him and her to have what I have—that they will soon join me in praising the God who is sovereign over them, over me, over all of us!

God is sovereign over all persons. God has the ability to use His sovereignty to the point of directing the specific actions of any person He wishes. We can read in Exodus how God caused Pharaoh to refuse to release the Jewish people. There are similar examples all throughout Scripture. I personally experienced God exercising His sovereignty to accomplish His will in a certain circumstance. There was a time when I went to a certain jail to ask permission to minister there. I was told in advance the officer over the jail prohibited personal contact with the prisoners; there was always a wall separating the two. I wanted to be able to shake hands and give pats on the shoulder, to stand side by side and look at the Bible together with the inmates. I prayed before I went, asking God to open that door and break down that wall. I did not mention the issue to the officer; I just trusted God to work out His will. If God wanted to break down the wall between the inmates and me, He would do that in His way and in His time.

I pulled up to the jail on my motorcycle and placed it all in God’s hands. I felt like this whole effort rested on being able to get the wall of separation taken down, but I knew it was totally up to God. When I went into the jail, the officer over this large jail took the time to personally show me around. When we got to the location where the residents were brought to hear the sermon, the officer said, “The inmates will be here, and you will be”—he looked at me—“in there with them.” Without me ever saying a word to anyone, God sovereignly worked out His purposes. God accomplished ministry there in that jail because He is sovereign. The Bible is filled with examples of God’s sovereignty.

How is God’s sovereignty important to our daily life? Knowing God is sovereign is the key to living joyful, peaceful lives in this world filled with challenges and threats. Please reflect on this: When we get the real picture of God’s sovereignty over all things; when we bring that together with the knowledge that God loves us so much He sent His only Son to die in our place; when we know God has great plans for our lives and that God is almighty—then all fear fades away. This

is a picture of God's perfect love, which casts out fear: "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear as to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love" (1 John 4:18).

Knowing God is a sovereign God, we can face the day, the night, the diagnosis, the loss, whatever life throws our way, with absolute calm and trust and a sure knowledge that all is well—it is well with our soul. We need not fear any terrorist group, not their bombs, not their swords, not their jihad or any other thing they bring to the table. Why? Because I know my God is in control, and if they bring something bad against me, He will work it out for good. Let's look at a couple of examples from Scripture:

¹⁵When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him." ¹⁶So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this command before he died: ¹⁷'Say to Joseph, "Please forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you.'" And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when they spoke to him. ¹⁸His brothers also came and fell down before him and said, "Behold, we are your servants." ¹⁹But Joseph said to them, "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? ²⁰As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. ²¹So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones." Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them. (Genesis 50:15-21)

King Nebuchadnezzar declared that at the sound of certain music all people had to bow down and worship him. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused. They would only worship God. Why would anything bad happen to men who were doing good things?

¹⁶Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered and said to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. ¹⁷If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. ¹⁸But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up." ¹⁹Then Nebuchadnezzar was filled with fury, and the expression of his face was changed against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. He ordered the furnace heated seven times more than it was usually heated. ²⁰And he ordered some of the mighty men of his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and to cast them into the burning fiery furnace. ²¹Then

these men were bound in their cloaks, their tunics, their hats, and their other garments, and they were thrown into the burning fiery furnace. ²²Because the king's order was urgent and the furnace overheated, the flame of the fire killed those men who took up Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. ²³And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell bound into the burning fiery furnace. ²⁴Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished and rose up in haste. He declared to his counselors, "Did we not cast three men bound into the fire?" They answered and said to the king, "True, O king." ²⁵He answered and said, "But I see four men unbound, walking in the midst of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods." ²⁶Then Nebuchadnezzar came near to the door of the burning fiery furnace; he declared, "Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out, and come here!" Then Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego came out from the fire. (Daniel 3:16-26)

Jesus lived a perfect life. God said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17). Yet Jesus was crucified, died, and was buried. How could a loving God allow this to happen to His own Son? First, I sure thank Him that He did; that God ordained those events is the only reason we are here now. Second, God does not look at things the way we look at things. God has perfect vision that is not bound by time or space. His will is consistent with His perfect love, mercy, grace, goodness, knowledge, and power. Whatever God does is just fine. I do not always understand. I do not always like God's will. But I can always, always, always trust God's sovereign will. Whatever God does or allows will work out for good for all those who are born-again believers trusting in Jesus Christ and called according to His purposes.

¹⁴Then if my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sins and restore their land. (2 Chronicles 7:14, NLT)

It is vital to our daily lives and our growth in faith to know God. Knowing God in His absolute sovereignty is critical to our daily life. Let's close by quoting A. W. Tozer on the sovereignty of God:

God's sovereignty means that if there's anybody in this wide world of sinful men that should be restful and peaceful in an hour like this, it should be Christians. We should not be under the burden of apprehension and worry because we are

the children of a God who is always free to do as He pleases. There is not one rope or chain or hindrance upon Him, because He is absolutely sovereign.

God is free to carry out His eternal purposes to their conclusions. I have believed this since I first became a Christian. I had good teachers who taught me this and I have believed it with increasing joy ever since. God does not play by ear, or doodle, or follow whatever happens to come into His mind or let one idea suggest another. God works according to the plans which He purposed in Christ Jesus before Adam walked in the garden, before the sun, moon and stars were made. God, who has lived all our tomorrows and carries time in His bosom, is carrying out His eternal purposes.

His eternal purposes will not change, however the prophetic teachers may change their minds or whatever contemporary theologians may decide is the right thing to believe. God Almighty has already given us His theology, and I don't give a snap of my finger for contemporary theology. I believe in theology, which is contemporary surely, but it is also as ancient as the throne of God and as eternal as the eternities to come. And we Christians are in this mighty river, being carried along by the sovereign purposes of God.

The sovereignty of God involves all authority and all power. I think you can see instantly that God could never be sovereign without the power to bring about His will or the authority to exercise His power. Kings, presidents and others who rule over men must have the authority to govern and the power to make good on that authority. A ruler cannot stand up and say, "Do this, please, if you feel like doing it." He says, "Do it," and then has an army and a police force behind him. He has authority to command and power to carry out his commands. And God has to have both of these.⁵⁸

God is absolutely sovereign. I am so glad He is. Can you imagine what it would be like if you or I had any control over what happens in this world? God is sovereign; praise be to Him.

58 A. W. Tozer, *The Attributes of God: Deeper into the Father's Heart*, vol. 2 (Camp Hill, PA: WingSpread, 2007), 145–146.

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Prayer thanking God and acknowledging His sovereignty:

O sovereign God, You alone are Lord. You have set the earth and all of the universe in place. You created things exactly according to Your own plan. We were not there; we had no part in Your creation. You put each of us in the place You precisely and perfectly planned for us; we are all wonderfully and perfectly made according to Your sovereign will from before eternity. We can enter into this day and each day saying, “Lord, thank You that You, not us, are in charge of our life, this universe, and all that happens here. We don’t understand all things, but in all things we trust You and know Your love, Your holiness, Your mercy, and Your sovereignty are fully at work, and we can rest and trust in You.” Father, help us to embrace the full assurance we have when we know our loving Father is fully in control—no matter what. Lord, when we hurt and we don’t know why, help us to know that if we, as sinful earthly parents, know how to give good gifts to our children, how much more do You give wonderful and perfect gifts to us. We admit we don’t understand some of the things that come our way, but in the midst of trial and even tragedy we can say as Job did, “The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD” (Job 1:21). Amen.

CHAPTER 52

GOD IS UNCHANGING

“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”

—Hebrews 13:8

WE LIVE IN A WORLD of change, a world where people are concerned by what is “trending,” what is popular now. What do the latest polls show? What is in fashion now? What is the politically correct way of saying . . . ? We live in a world of change.

God does not change. God is not interested in what Wall Street, Main Street, or Back Street thinks is in vogue. God is the same always.

God doesn’t change with the tide; in fact, He controls the tides, and yet He never changes. His mind is made up: He loves you, and He has a plan that will prosper you. He has set boundaries in this world that are here not to tickle our fancy but to save us from our own foolishness. There are only two ways to live in this world. We can be smart, make good choices, and live the life God called us to by honoring and revering Him, His Word, and His way: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction” (Proverbs 1:7). Or we can follow the way of the world, being blown and tossed here and there by every wind of change and by whatever the current political correctness happens to be—in essence, despising the true wisdom and solid instruction that are ours in God’s Word.

God has laid out a plan, but it is not according to worldly ways; it is a plan based on God’s perfect knowledge. He knows us, our weaknesses and our failures; God cares for us better than we could ever care for ourselves.

God Is Unchanging

¹⁶Don't be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters. ¹⁷Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. (James 1:16-17, NIV)

I was born, raised, and lived most of my life in the small but beautiful corner of the world called Franklin County, Mississippi. For many years when you traveled U.S. Highway 98 through our county, you could count on seeing Mr. Cicero Nettles, at eighty-plus years of age, in his faded blue overalls, sitting in front of his house and waving at anyone who passed by. Stopping to visit Mr. Cicero was one of the greatest earthly blessings I ever experienced. He was a gentle, Christ-centered man with cornflower blue eyes shining brightly, a warm smile, and a firm embrace. A short time before his death, I visited him and was blessed to see that, even facing death, he was the same. He never changed; he was always Mr. Cicero, a strong, quiet, steady man who trusted in the God who never changes. He knew without a doubt that come what may, He could count on God in all weather. Mr. Cicero was one of those blessed earthly examples of God's unchanging character.

⁶ And I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns. (Philippians 1:6, NLT)

We live in a topsy-turvy world where everything seems to be constantly changing. Today, more than ever, we need to know God, to know we can count on Him. We need to know that when everything around us is falling apart, when everything we thought of as dependable, when all that we once held dear is turned upside down, we can absolutely count on God. God is a firm foundation, and He never changes.

The world around us is telling us to forget about what the Bible says; this is a new day, and we need new ways. These are not new days and the ways of the world are not new; the world today is no different than at any other time in history. God is not intimidated or moved by the actions of the world. He has seen our failures since He put us here; He has revealed Himself to us and made known His truth. It is up to us to turn away from the changing world to the One who never changes, God, our shelter and resting place through all times.

Read these words from Paul's letter to the Romans that describe the world today just as perfectly as it did two thousand years ago:

¹⁹They know the truth about God because he has made it obvious to them. ²⁰For ever since the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky. Through everything God made, they can clearly see his invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature. So they have no excuse for not knowing God. ²¹Yes, they knew God, but they wouldn't worship him as God or even give him thanks. And they began to think up foolish ideas of what God was like. As a result, their minds became dark and confused. ²²Claiming to be wise, they instead became utter fools. ²³And instead of worshiping the glorious, ever-living God, they worshiped idols made to look like mere people and birds and animals and reptiles. ²⁴So God abandoned them to do whatever shameful things their hearts desired. As a result, they did vile and degrading things with each other's bodies. ²⁵They traded the truth about God for a lie. So they worshiped and served the things God created instead of the Creator himself, who is worthy of eternal praise! Amen. ²⁶That is why God abandoned them to their shameful desires. Even the women turned against the natural way to have sex and instead indulged in sex with each other. ²⁷And the men, instead of having normal sexual relations with women, burned with lust for each other. Men did shameful things with other men, and as a result of this sin, they suffered within themselves the penalty they deserved. ²⁸Since they thought it foolish to acknowledge God, he abandoned them to their foolish thinking and let them do things that should never be done. ²⁹Their lives became full of every kind of wickedness, sin, greed, hate, envy, murder, quarreling, deception, malicious behavior, and gossip. ³⁰They are backstabbers, haters of God, insolent, proud, and boastful. They invent new ways of sinning, and they disobey their parents. ³¹They refuse to understand, break their promises, are heartless, and have no mercy. ³²They know God's justice requires that those who do these things deserve to die, yet they do them anyway. Worse yet, they encourage others to do them, too. (Romans 1:19-32, NLT)

Nothing has changed. We see people who reject God today acting just like the people who rejected God thousands of years ago. I want to make sure I am clear on this: None of us is any better—we have all sinned and fallen short (see Romans 3:23), and it is only by the saving work of Christ that any one of us is born again and thus saved from sin. The only way we overcome our old nature is by trusting in the finished work of Christ.

⁴But you belong to God, my dear children. You have already won a victory over those people, because the Spirit who lives in you is

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greater than the spirit who lives in the world.⁵ Those people belong to this world, so they speak from the world's viewpoint, and the world listens to them.⁶ But we belong to God, and those who know God listen to us. If they do not belong to God, they do not listen to us. That is how we know if someone has the Spirit of truth or the spirit of deception. (1 John 4:4-6, NLT)

God is the same always. When life changes, we don't have to panic. We can know that an all-loving, holy, just, merciful God has not changed overnight. When everything around us is falling apart and it looks like life as we have known it is disappearing, we can rest in the absolute truth that God is unchanging. He loves you, He is sovereign, and He knows the circumstances; none of this has caught Him off guard. God is not going anywhere; He has promised to be with you, and He is. God never changes.

⁶I am the LORD, and I do not change. (Malachi 3:6, NLT)

God does not change, and neither does His Word. There is no provision in the Word of God for changing times.

¹⁸For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.

¹⁹Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:18-19)

This is what we have to know to live in this world in perfect peace: The God who created this world, who created you and me, is here; He is not going anywhere, and He does not change ever. The events of this day will not change who God is; no matter how horrific an event may be, God's love and presence and peace and power are still here. His love and His plan for your life are still the same—to bless you and prosper you in Christ Jesus. God is perfect in all of His ways.

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Prayer thanking God that He is unchanging:

Gracious heavenly Father, thank You that we can count on You no matter what. You do not change; You are light, love, gracious, merciful, just, holy, ever present, all powerful, and all knowing, and neither You nor anything about You has ever changed—nor will You ever change. When we awake in the morning, we don't have to look outside or run to the television, the computer, or our cell phones to see what is going on in the world because You are and You always will be. No matter the weather, no matter the news, no matter the politics, no matter the diagnosis, no matter what anyone else says or does, You are God and You love us, You have a plan for us, You are coming back for us, and in Christ Jesus it is well with our soul. We thank You and praise You forever and ever. Amen.

CHAPTER 53

GOD IS HOLY

"Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian, and he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. And the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. And Moses said, 'I will turn aside to see this great sight, why the bush is not burned.' When the LORD saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, 'Moses, Moses!' And he said, 'Here I am.' Then he said, 'Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.' And he said, 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God."

—Exodus 3:1-6

HOLY IS NOT WHAT GOD does; God doesn't act holy—He is holy, completely pure, true in every sense of the word. It is so important to know God is holy because it means all that He has said and done is holy too. I will tell you that there are things that have happened, as recorded in the Bible and as have occurred in my lifetime, that I do not understand. What I do know is that God, in His holiness, is perfect in all His ways, and those events that we don't understand are done or allowed by a God who is holy in all His ways. This is so important: We can know that because God is holy, His plans are holy. We can trust the one true, holy God—period!

⁵Trust in the LORD with all your heart; do not depend on your own understanding. (Proverbs 3:5, NLT)

Arthur W. Pink said, “God’s holiness is manifested in His works. ‘The Lord is righteous in all his ways, and holy in all his works’ (Psalm 145:17). Nothing but that which is excellent can proceed from Him. Holiness is the rule of all His actions.”⁵⁹

The world’s view of God’s holiness may have changed, but God has not. God’s name and His character are thrown around like toys and often like a piece of trash. God is a holy God, and we cannot approach Him in any way other than through the finished work of Christ Jesus. We, as born-again believers in Jesus Christ, have to regain a deep recognition of God’s holiness, a deep reverence—we need to get what Jesus meant when He taught us to pray, “Hallowed be your name” (Matthew 6:9).

When we know God is holy—pure and completely without error or failure—we can rest comfortably in the events of our lives. Knowing that God is holy is key to responding to the challenges of life. The words of the world around us are just throwaway words, hanging in the air for a moment and then gone. God has spoken, and His Word shall stand forever. The one and only holy God has spoken into your life, and you can stand on, build on, trust in, and rest your very life and eternity upon Him and what He has said.

³Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory! (Isaiah 6:3)

God has spoken clearly to us about holiness:

⁷God has called us to live holy lives, not impure lives. ⁸Therefore, anyone who refuses to live by these rules is not disobeying human teaching but is rejecting God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you. (1 Thessalonians 4:7-8, NLT)

Holiness is not an item on God’s buffet of spiritual truths we can choose or pass over. He said if we don’t pursue the holy life He calls us to, we are not rejecting man but rejecting God! Rejecting God is not a choice I want to make; do you want to reject God?

Holiness is not a plan of discipline for us; holiness is a great gift God wants us to embrace and enjoy in our lives. Holiness is a part of God’s plan for you and for me.

⁹For God saved us and called us to live a holy life. He did this, not because we deserved it, but because that was his plan from before

59 Arthur W. Pink, *The Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1975), 45.

the beginning of time—to show us his grace through Christ Jesus. (2 Timothy 1:9, NLT)

Since before the creation of the world, God's plan is for each of us to be in a dynamic love relationship with Him, living holy lives before Him. He carried out His part of the plan when He sent His only Son to die in my place and in your place and when He called us into a love relationship with Himself through Christ and led by the Holy Spirit. How can we say, "God, thanks for what You have done, but I want to bypass this 'holy' thing; it will be fine with me just to be a good religious person"? That God said, "Be holy," should be enough for us. Yet, we also are blessed and helped to know God's plan is not just holy; it is perfect for us and carried out with such deliberate love and sacrifice. Rejecting God's call to live holy lives is rejecting God and missing God's very best for each of us.

¹⁶You shall be holy, for I am holy. (1 Peter 1:16)

We have only one answer to God's call to holiness: "Yes, Lord, yes to Your will and to Your way; yes, Lord, yes with our whole heart we will obey." Any other response is to reject God.



Prayer focusing on God's holiness:

Heavenly Father, we rest in the knowledge that You are holy in all Your ways. We know that no matter what happens in and around us, it is all consistent with Your holiness. You are sovereign over this earth, and You have a plan to deal with the circumstances of this world. We can rest in the blessed assurance of who You are and what You are doing. You are God, You are holy, and all is well. We give thanks to You, our holy and loving God. Father, we know that You have called us to live holy lives. You have told us and shown us the way; in fact, You are the way! Lord, help us to have courage and love for You and get out of our spiritual rocking chair and live full tilt for Jesus—seeking to be holy in every way because You, the Lord our God, is holy. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

CHAPTER 54

GOD IS FAIR

“But,’ some might say, ‘our sinfulness serves a good purpose, for it helps people see how righteous God is. Isn’t it unfair, then, for him to punish us?’ (This is merely a human point of view.) Of course not! If God were not entirely fair, how would he be qualified to judge the world?”

—Romans 3:5-6 (NLT)

“IT’S JUST NOT FAIR. Not fair at all!” If you are a parent, you have heard this many times. If you are not a parent, then you remember saying this to your parents. You just know you were not treated fairly. The truth is, there are a lot of things people do to one another that are not fair. God is fair in all things and at all times. We have to know God is fair!

When our eyes first open in the morning, our first thoughts need to be about God—and we need to have right thoughts of God, to consciously think and know that:

This is the day the Lord has made.

- God loves me.
- God is fair in all He does.
- God is holy.
- God is unchanging.
- God is sovereign.
- God is infinite, eternal, just, gracious . . .

When we know who God is, we know how the day will go, and we can say with great peace and joy, “Come what may this day; it is well with my soul.” No matter what happens today, it is happening under the watch and care of a loving God, who is perfect in all of His ways and absolutely fair in all things.

One of the most dangerous and destructive things that can happen to a Christian is a spirit of bitterness. Recently, I dealt with a circumstance where I was starting to experience bitterness. I had never really been bitter in my life, but all of a sudden I was getting bitter because of circumstances over which I had no control. When we allow ourselves to become bitter or downhearted by outside circumstances, we are playing right into the hands of the enemy and failing to trust in God, who is fair in all circumstances. I was soon reminded that no matter what the circumstances, nothing comes into my life that does not pass first through the hands of a loving, holy, and fair God. Instead of getting bitter (what I was getting bitter over was nothing in the grand scheme of life although it seemed large at the moment), I had to say, “Lord, I trust You, and in You all is well because I know You love me and You are fair in all Your ways.”

Fairest Lord Jesus⁶⁰

*Fairest Lord Jesus,
Ruler of all nature,
O Thou of God and man the Son;
Thee will I cherish,
Thee will I honor,
Thou, my soul's glory, joy and crown.*

*Fair are the meadows,
Fairer still the woodlands,
Robed in the blooming garb of spring;
Jesus is fairer,
Jesus is purer,
Who makes the woeful heart to sing.*

Fair is the sunshine,

60 Joseph A. Seiss, “Fairest Lord Jesus,” 1873, *Logos Hymnal*, 1st ed. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1995).

*Fairer still the moonlight
And all the twinkling, starry host;
Jesus shines brighter,
Jesus shines purer
Than all the angels heaven can boast.*

*Beautiful Savior,
Lord of all the nations,
Son of God and Son of man!
Glory and honor,
Praise, adoration,
Now and forevermore be Thine!*

The whisper in your ear that you are not being treated fairly is not coming from the Holy Spirit. The enemy is trying to get you to believe you are being mistreated, that life is unfair to you and you need to take control. That thinking is not a move toward strength but rather toward weakness and destruction. The most powerful move we can make is to fall on our knees and cry out to God, who is fair in every way.



Prayer acknowledging that God is fair:

Lord, we acknowledge that You are the author of fairness; there is nothing fair apart from the fact You made it so. You are God, and You shine fair in all things. When I go out into the world today, no matter how difficult the circumstances that come my way, I can rest in the sure knowledge that You are fair in all things. Help me to know assuredly that my hope is not in the ways of the world but in the ways of God, and Your ways are exceedingly and abundantly fair. Thank You, God, for Your fairness in my life. Amen.

CHAPTER 55

GOD IS RIGHTEOUS

GOD IS IN CONTROL, AND He is righteous in all of His ways. This is challenging because there is much we do not understand about life. Every day we find ourselves asking, “Why, God?” We will at times continue to ask the question, but now we must move past the question to the knowledge: “God, no matter what happens today, no matter that I don’t understand it, I know that You are righteous in all Your ways, and I can absolutely trust You!”

We must see God in His righteousness to come to the necessary and absolute reality and truth of our own unrighteousness. God is righteous and the source of all that is right; apart from Him, there is nothing righteous in us. We must completely abandon—yes, completely and finally abandon—any thought that we are righteous.

My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less⁶¹

*My hope is built on nothing less
Than Jesus' blood and righteousness.
I dare not trust the sweetest frame,
But wholly lean on Jesus' name.*

REFRAIN

*On Christ the solid rock I stand,
all other ground is sinking sand;
all other ground is sinking sand.*

61 Edward Mote, “My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less,” 1834.

*When darkness veils His lovely face,
I rest on His unchanging grace.
In every high and stormy gale,
my anchor holds within the veil.*

REFRAIN

*His oath, His covenant, His blood,
support me in the whelming flood.
When all around my soul gives way,
He then is all my Hope and Stay.*

REFRAIN

*When He shall come with trumpet sound,
Oh may I then in Him be found.
Dressed in His righteousness alone,
faultless to stand before the throne.*

REFRAIN

Have you ever given thought to how much time we spend being right or seeking to prove we are right? We spend an inordinate portion of our lives seeking to be right and proving that we are right. We want others to know we are right and they are wrong, that what we said was right (we were justified in acting as we did); in small, completely inconsequential things we want to make sure everyone knows we were right. The truth is, anything we do that is not solely for His glory and does not honor God is not right (and very few things in any of our lives meet that criteria). Likely there is nothing upon which we expend more time and energy than being right. We seek to be right above all else, yet we fail miserably. In vain do we seek to establish righteousness on our own, in ourselves. Self-righteousness is no righteousness! There is nothing we fail at more miserably than our efforts at self-righteousness.

God alone is righteous! Righteousness is a part of who God is, and God is the source of all righteousness. In the same way that God is light, God is righteous. We can no more achieve a state of righteousness apart from God than we can create light without relying on the light that is wholly from God.

What does God have to say about our efforts at self-righteousness?

¹⁰ As the Scriptures say, “No one is righteous—not even one.¹¹ No one is truly wise; no one is seeking God.¹² All have turned away; all have become useless. No one does good, not a single one.” (Romans 3:10-12, NLT)

Where do you and I fit into the “no one is righteous, not even one”? That hits square in the face of our failed efforts to produce our own brand of righteousness. The whole truth is that none of us, nor any position we take, is righteous unless it is based on and rests wholly in Christ Jesus. Pursuit of righteousness, personally and professionally, has been a significant part of my life’s efforts, but today I humbly bow and acknowledge God is righteous and beside Him is no other. On my very best days, and all other days too, I fall woefully short—my very best is like filthy rags in the presence of Almighty God. There is no more important lesson we can learn—at the moment we fully grasp our unrighteousness, we begin to see and understand God’s perfect righteousness and our total dependence upon Him.

The failures in my life come from my failed efforts at self-righteousness. The reality is we all suffer this ill-advised course of pursuing our own brand of righteousness or self-righteousness—that is to say no righteousness. You have met with no better success than have I. Righteousness is a part of who God is, and it is ours only to the extent we have yielded our lives to Him through Christ Jesus as we are led by the Holy Spirit. The only righteousness in you and me is the righteousness that is of and from God.

¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. ¹⁸ All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation;¹⁹ that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰ Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.²¹ For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:17-21)

We need to know how important righteousness is to God. He is right, He is holy, and He has called us to the standard of righteousness. This is a picture of how we have done in response to God’s call:

¹⁸ For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness

suppress the truth.¹⁹ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them.²⁰ For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.²¹ For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools,²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. (Romans 1:18-23)

We have no defense, and we have no valid excuse to offer for our unrighteousness. But we do have an answer, and that answer is Jesus. We just read this: “He made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21). We have one path to righteousness, and that path is a person—the person of Jesus Christ. Here is what Jesus has said about our journey:

¹ “Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me.² In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.⁴ And you know the way to where I am going.”⁵ Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?”⁶ Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.⁷ If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.” (John 14:1-7)

God is righteous, and righteousness is His standard for our lives. When we begin to understand God’s righteousness, then the answer to the question “Who do I say God is?” is in large part “God is righteous.” Having settled in our mind once and for all that God is absolutely righteous and we are not, we can fully abandon our futile efforts at self-righteousness. We can enjoy the ultimate freedom of resting in the righteousness of Christ Jesus.

Paul explained that righteousness is a gift from God alone: “For if, because of one man’s trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ” (Romans 5:17).

God Is Righteous

Knowing and embracing our unrighteousness is not a cause for lament but a foundation for celebration. In our recognition of God's righteousness, we are blessed with peace and freedom found nowhere else. Knowing God is righteous and we are not is the exact message of Jesus' very first words in His teaching we call "The Sermon on the Mount": "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:3).

To get a fuller sense of this verse, let's look at it in the Amplified Bible: "Blessed [spiritually prosperous, happy, to be admired] are the poor in spirit [those devoid of spiritual arrogance, those who regard themselves as insignificant], for theirs is the kingdom of heaven [both now and forever]" (Matthew 5:3, AMP).

Here is my word for it: When I understand that I have nothing to offer God, that I am totally and completely dependent upon Him, I begin to find the peace that passes all understanding in the finished work of Christ Jesus, who said on the cross, "It is finished." We need to be finished seeking our own righteousness and rest fully in His righteousness alone!



Prayer thanking God for His righteousness:

Heavenly Father, righteous God, You are righteous and I am not. Lord, help me to once and for all lay aside the notion that there is any self-righteousness in me. Lord, I am poor, helpless, spiritually blind, and naked apart from Your saving grace. Lord, thank You for loving me so much that You sent Your only Son to become sin that I might become righteous in Him and before You. I am the righteousness of God in Christ Jesus, and for that I am eternally dependent and grateful. Thank You, righteous God, for making me right before you in Christ. Amen.

WAYPOINT #8:

THE BOOK NO ONE WANTS TO READ (AND EVEN FEWER WANT TO WRITE)

PART THREE RESULTS FROM A painful but fearless effort to face my own demons and shortcomings. I call it “the book no one wants to read (and even fewer want to write)” because of the pain and challenge of looking at yourself honestly, critically, and thoroughly. This journey through my own life reveals the sins of unadulterated selfishness and pride, the most revolting character traits in others and unmentionable in your own life. These despicable findings and others as well are confessed and laid out (throughout this writing) for all to see. Yet the pain is not just my pain, for if you honestly review, you will find yourself here too on some of these pages and inquiries because my sin is not unique to me. There is no human life left untouched by some level of selfishness and pride; everyone willing to make a fearless search and full confession will find themselves here.

PART THREE

THE REALITY OF WHO WE ARE BEFORE GOD

PREFACE

"In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said: 'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!' And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said: 'Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!' Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and said: 'Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.'"

—Isaiah 6:1-7

TO REALLY KNOW MYSELF, I had to dig deeper than I had ever gone before into who God is. Like Isaiah, I saw the Lord for who He is—or at least as much of Him as my mind could take in at this point in my life and spiritual journey. Seeing the all-holy God, I recognized that in spite of all my efforts to be holy, I was blind, pitiful, poor, wretched, and naked before the one true, holy God.

By necessity, God's holiness sets Him apart—far apart—from me because I was conceived in sin, I was brought forth in sin, and in sin I have lived my life. Even when I was “preaching,” I was doing it in my strength; I did not understand God's glory at the depth I needed to, and I am just now understanding it at the most elemental levels. Sin (my definition but based on the whole counsel of Scripture) is failing to recognize and honor God for who He is. There are many sins (ways that I fail to acknowledge and honor God through obedience to His

Word), but the core or essence of sin is failing to give God the glory that He is due and must have. This same thought was expressed quite uniquely by Irwin Russell in the poem “Christmas-Night in the Quarters”: “The sinfulness of sin isn’t the sin you sinning but the spirit you sinning in.”⁶²

Paul, writing under inspiration of the Holy Spirit, said it like this:

¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹⁷ For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.” ¹⁸ For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

¹⁹ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰ For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. ²¹ For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. (Romans 1:16-21)

We cannot honor God for who He is apart from a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. Yet even as born-again believers, we have so far to go—we have to get from full of ourselves to empty, then be filled again with Him—so that “it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2:20). We have to learn the holiness of God, the sinfulness of sin, and the high and holy place God is calling us to!

Lord, help me, the journey is long, and I am so weak.

62 The phrase here is a loose paraphrase of the writings of Irwin Russell, an African American lawyer in the 1800s from Port Gibson, Mississippi, and specifically from his poem titled “Christmas-Night in the Quarters” [Irwin Russell, *Christmas-Night in the Quarters and Other Poems* (New York: The Century Co., 1888, 1917)].

CHAPTER 56

“THE CATTLE ON A THOUSAND HILLS”

*“There is a way that seems right to a man,
but in the end it leads to death.”*

—Proverbs 14:12 (NIV84)

¹ Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden’?” ² And the woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, ³ but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.’” ⁴ But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die. ⁵ For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” ⁶ So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. ⁷ Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths. ⁸ And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. (Genesis 3:1-8)

Almost everything in the garden was for Adam and Eve to eat, but they lusted for and chose the one thing God said “no” about. They had it all, but they wanted one thing more. The rest is, as they say, history,

but what I have discovered, very painfully for my ego, is that it is my history too. I always thought of myself as a person who, at my core, respected and honored God and people, but what I have discovered is I have spent many years not honoring God and not honoring others in various capacities. The depths of my sinfulness I do not yet know because God alone can see me fully as I am, yet to the extent I have seen myself in this process, I have laid it out as candidly as I know how. The picture is not flattering, and it is very disconcerting yet necessary to be painted.

When I was doing the rewrite of this book (in early 2017), it suddenly hit me I have lived my life as a selfish, self-centered, prideful, arrogant person who thought “the cattle on a thousand hills”⁶³ and the fruit tree in the middle of the garden were mine to eat as and when I wanted. In the words of a once famous sports star: “God wants Hollis to be happy” so I can do what I want and as I want. In the recovery world this is called “egomaniac with an inferiority complex,” and there is a specific set of personality flaws that diagnose this malady. Honestly, while I do not meet the classic definition (self-diagnosis of being free of this disease probably confirms the malady), I think I am there. Let me explain.

When I was only two, I saw what was out in front of me as mine to take without restraint. Leaving home and going to the barbershop, eating glue, eating pesticides, eating nuts, bolts, and washers (they belonged to Mr. Hoover, who was repairing my mother’s stove), stopping trains, taking guns that were not mine, not having any respect for the safety of others, and taking into consideration a thousand and one other areas of concern that all point to one thing—I had the ego to believe that if it was there, it was there for me (like Adam and Eve) coupled with the inferiority complex that said, “You need this so that you can be like other people.”

I am writing this in 2017, and I am recognizing what at least some people must have known about me all my life: I had no respect for boundaries or authority if it was in my way. I can think of many instances where I just assumed if it was there, it was okay for me to enjoy it. Why would God want to deny me any of these things? He wants me to be happy, right? Wrong. This is where it all breaks down: God does not desire my happiness, but He does require my honor, respect, and obedience to Him. I was following in the path of my great,

63 Psalm 50:10.

“The Cattle on a Thousand Hills”

great, great, great grandfather Adam, who saw what he wanted and went for it—never mind what God had said.

In the spring of 1966 God said to me, “I so loved you that I sent My Son to die in your place, and by My grace through faith, a gift from Me, I have saved you at this altar, and now the rest of your life will be Mine to direct.” I said, “Yes, Lord, I am so pleased to serve You.” And that is what I initially thought. Then when that didn’t suit my plans (I had always told my daddy I would be a lawyer like him), I just did it my way. “I did it my way” may make a great hit in the music world, but in God’s economy it is a total disaster. That was 1966, and fifty years later God finally got my attention. At sixty-four I am just starting to awaken to these principles. Today (January 30, 2017) I went for a short walk in the woods and was listening to God speak—He showed me the fallacy of seeking to have and live life on my terms rather than on His terms.

I reflect back to my father’s International Jeep Scout (I think it was a 1959 model) that he bought from his friend Harris Jones. I think I was about ten or eleven when I asked to sit in it and then to crank it and then to back it up in the driveway and then to go around the block—and then it was mine. I honestly don’t ever recall him riding in it again. I was a freshman in college, and I took a group of my college buddies to my daddy’s new pier and boathouse in Louisiana. Of course, like the jeep, like the pistol, like the .22 rifle, like everything else in my life, I didn’t bother to ask my father. It didn’t occur to me to address the concern that he had spent hard-earned money to put it there and that it was his not mine. I just was interested in going and showing my friends “what I had” even though what I had was absolutely nothing. Of course, when we arrived and it was locked, rather than say we would come back, I just broke the lock off. A little while later my father showed up unexpectedly (it was unexpected to me but not to him); it was his place, and he was taking off to go enjoy the fruits of his labor. Instead, he had to deal with his disrespectful, egomaniac son who had destroyed his property in order to serve his own wishes.

When I look back across the years, it was not just my father’s jeep or his lake house but everything he gave me I took as mine to use as I determined. He and my dear friend, almost a second father, Jimmy Torrey treated me better than I deserved, but I always pushed the envelope to the outer limit. I elected to do things on family property without consulting anyone; it wasn’t that the things were wrong—it’s just that I assumed if I thought it should be done, then it should

be done without ever seeking a consensus. In the same way that I abused my relationship with my heavenly Father and my earthly father and mother, so I did with my sisters and my brother and my cousins. Essentially I never gave it much thought: it's there, I want it, why would anyone deny me the right to be happy, to have things my way? In addition to all the other problems that are obvious with such an attitude, there is no happiness there. Parents give us boundaries to preserve and promote a good life for their children. God did not set the boundaries for Adam and Eve or me to deny happiness but to ensure happiness. No one is more interested in or capable of providing for me than He who created me, but I effectively block the pipeline of His provision when I fail to honor Him for who He is. This is true with many earthly authorities as well.

God provided everything to Adam and Eve. They wanted for nothing, and they had God to converse with on a daily basis. Not to deny them but for their own best interests, God said not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Of course, that is the very tree of which they ate, and when it came time to answer for it, they blamed the snake, each other, and God. In like fashion, if denied any pleasure (taking my friends to enjoy my father's boat, taking his jeep, taking his gun), I reacted wrongly and resented the limitations even though the limitations were there for my own good (just as they were for Adam and Eve). My father and his family gave me the land I lived on and later lost due to my own foolishness and refusal to understand the purpose of the gift in the first place—because that stood in the way of what I wanted! My father pleaded with me not to go into the restaurant business, but I ignored his pleas and those of other family members. I not only ignored them, I thought their attitude was disrespectful and out of place. After all, "It was my property," right? Wrong. We are the owners of nothing; we only act as temporary stewards of the things we hold. Just for a brief season we hold them under direction from above; all that we have is a gift from God and is to be used to honor Him.

This picture reoccurs and reappears throughout my life at least up to and through August 7, 2008. In some measure the overall attitude continued because the lesson of honoring God and others is an ongoing process in my life. Yes, God has done some amazing transformative work in my life; I am astonished at the God-sized things He has done. Yet, the deep personality flaws still remain (they are many), and they are the foundation of my failures. What in the world should I do?

I am not the first or only one to suffer from this malady. The question has been posed before. Look with me at what the Apostle Paul said in his letter to the church at Rome:

¹⁵ For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ¹⁶ Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. ¹⁷ So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. ¹⁸ For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. ¹⁹ For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. ²⁰ Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. ²¹ So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. ²² For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, ²³ but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. ²⁴ Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? ²⁵ Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin. ¹ There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ² For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. ³ For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴ in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. ⁵ For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. (Romans 7:15–8:5)

My daddy was right: I was too big for my britches. I was so selfish that even though I knew my heavenly Father owned the cattle on a thousand hills, I thought He wouldn't mind if I used them my way instead of the way He had laid out for me. For about sixty years this is the way I lived my life. Slowly, finally, the light is coming on, and I am starting to see things the way God intended for them to be. Finally, on December 17, 2016, after fifty years of not being willing to listen, I have finally heard God and said, "Yes, Lord, yes to Your will and to Your way." Now that my hearing is getting really poor, I am starting to listen much better.

To God and to all who have been harmed by the floodwaters of the life of an egomaniac with an inferiority complex, I apologize. I am

sorry for my selfishness. This sounds trite, but the truth is I feel the burden at a deeper level than I can possibly describe, so all I can say is I am truly sorry, and I regret the harm caused by the floodwaters of my life. If there is any joy here, by God's grace, I have crossed the river. I have a long, long way to go, but God is so patient and so loving and so gracious; it took Him just a week to make the moon and the stars and Jupiter and Mars, but He is still working on me

Lord, You established the boundaries in the garden and in my life; they are there for Your glory and my own good. It is I and only I that have sinned and done that which is evil in Your sight. Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner.

CHAPTER 57

THE REAL ISSUE IS AUTHORITY

“And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.’”

—Matthew 28:18

WHAT WAS THE REAL PROBLEM when I was using my father's jeep, guns, pier, and other resources the way that suited me? Was it that my father did not want me to have the use of good things? No, in retrospect I do not know how any person could have been more generous to me than he and my mother were. The problem was all mine. I failed to acknowledge and come under the authority over me. This pattern has been emblematic of my entire life, doing things “Hollis’ way”—that is to say, “Wrong!”

I had a discussion with someone about this issue recently. I was putting forth this entire principle of sin being deeper than the action/omission in question. In that written exchange, I employed the following analogy:

You tell your child, “Do not eat the cookies I just baked; they are for after supper.” As soon as you leave, the child eats the cookies anyway, and that is a “sin.” But where does that sin come from? What is the underlying problem? The serious issue is not about cookies; cookies are actually great for the child in the right time, place, and amount. The deeper and real issue with the cookies is a failure to understand and honor your position as the parent with authority

over the child—authority that, by the way, is for the child’s good, not the child’s harm.

If the child understood:

1. You have the authority, and that’s all he needs to know.
2. Because/as a part of your position (which he is failing to recognize), you have perfect vision—you know what is really needed, you know what is good for him and when and in what amounts, and you would never withhold good but only danger/evil from him. By failing to honor your authority, the child has acted to his own harm.
3. The most important principle the child can ever learn (the most important thought the child will ever have as a child) is my parent loves me, cares for me, watches out for me, gave birth to me, and so knows infinitely more than I know about my needs and my desires and the proper way to fulfill them.
4. The child must know that recognizing you as parent is the most important principle/truth that he can ever learn as a child. Honoring the authority of the parent is so important that in a very real way, as a child and later as an adult, the child’s life hangs in the balance because you are only ever going to give him good gifts/you are only ever going to deny him hurtful things, and you will not say no for sake of frustrating him but to save and protect him.

Was it a sin to eat the cookies? Yes.

Was eating the cookies the ultimate sin here? No.

The child failing to fully recognize, honor, trust, and revere the place of the parent is the real sin and long-term tragedy here:

1. Because she is my mother, nothing else needs to be said.
2. But also because she loves me and knows best.
3. Cookies are good, but eaten outside of mom’s perfect plan, what is good becomes harmful and destructive.
4. Becoming “parent” himself (pridefully doing things his own way) is a destructive, disrespectful decision destroying the relationship and life itself.

The sinfulness of eating cookies is not the eating of the cookies but the spirit (I reject your position/authority/love/knowledge . . . and put myself in authority) the cookies are eaten in.

What is the ultimate issue in life? Who has authority? Who has the say-so, who is really in control? When we know and acknowledge the true authority of God in our lives, the pieces of life's puzzle fall into place.

In Paul's letter to the church at Rome, this issue is so clearly and precisely laid out in precept upon precept.

¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹⁷ For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith." ¹⁸ For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. ¹⁹ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰ For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. ²¹ For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. ²⁴ Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, ²⁵ because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. ²⁶ For this reason God gave them up to dis-honorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; ²⁷ and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiv-ing in themselves the due penalty for their error. ²⁸ And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. ²⁹ They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, ³⁰ slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of

evil, disobedient to parents,³¹ foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.³² Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them. (Romans 1:16-32)

When we take the time to really hear what God is saying here, the message is so clear. When we acknowledge God's place of authority, God's real position in time and eternity, we have sound wisdom for life. If we fail or refuse to acknowledge who God is and that He is God, we are swapping what is real and solid for what is not. We are making a choice that will affect our thinking in every way. God does not coerce us; He gives us over to our own choices, and the results are always disastrous when we fail to acknowledge His authority.

I am just now seeing that this was my life's battle—the battle over authority. It is with regret that I must acknowledge I completely rejected God's ultimate authority for much of my life. I rejected it in the ultimate sense of not obeying His call on me to preach, and this was my greatest sin because I followed me instead of God. However, I also rejected God's authority directly and indirectly—in lack of respect for my father's things, in failing to respect a myriad of other boundaries that were there for a reason. This is why I kept winding up in hospitals and emergency rooms and surgical suites and various treatment programs—I did things my way. I wasn't intentionally injuring myself, but I was purposefully—even if sometimes unknowingly as to the significance—rejecting anyone's attempt to tell me what to do.

I think C. S. Lewis is the person who said something to the effect of "pride is the ultimate sin"; in essence, he said pride is what made the devil be the devil. He refused to honor God's authority and to place God before and above all. It is the same thing Adam and Eve did, and I have been right in their footsteps for most of my life. I now see for the first time that even my good ("preaching") was done on my terms, in my way, and within the boundaries I wanted. That is why today, February 28, 2017, as I write this chapter, I am declaring to God: "Here I am, Lord. Take me. I am not my own, I am Yours." Let's put this in context: This is not some great act. This is me at sixty-three—after more than fifty years of rebellion, after I have used up a great deal of my time here, and after my body has seen its better days—finally coming to the simple place that was my basic duty all of my life.

The Real Issue Is Authority

The sinfulness of sin is refusing to honor God, refusing to acknowledge God's authority over all and in all. I am in God's hand and have no power, no authority, no ability other than what He specifically gives me. How can I not yield to Him in all things? His creation declares His glory, and either I get it or I reject Him—there is no middle ground.

WISDOM BEGINS WITH UNDERSTANDING
AND OBEYING THE POSITION AND
AUTHORITY OF GOD and THOSE PLACED
BY GOD IN AUTHORITY OVER US.

CHAPTER 58

THE REALITY OF WHO I AM

(*AND WHO WE ARE*)

*"Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips,
and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for
my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!"*

—Isaiah 6:5

YEARS AGO I MET A person who seemed to be devoid of any goodness at all. I thought to myself, “I hope I never have another experience like this.” I went for a long time without thinking of this person, and then one day, as I truly contemplated the holiness of God, I recognized the depth of my own sinfulness. I am that person I hoped never to meet. This portrait, be it ever so painful and personal, is not unique to me alone. Think of this, the Apostle Paul, who wrote the majority of the New Testament, penned these words: “The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost” (1 Timothy 1:15).

When I take an honest and sincere look at God and myself, I am snared by this truth: “Woe is me! . . . for I am a man of unclean lips . . . in the midst of a people of unclean lips” (Isaiah 6:5). Even though so many of my failures are laid out here and they are many, yet we must each recognize that we are impaled by the naked truth of Isaiah’s pointed words. If we look into the mirror of God’s holiness, we each must recognize, as Paul did of his own sinfulness, “I am the foremost,”

the chief sinner. If we fail to recognize who we really are before God, if we think, "Not me, I am not like _____," read with me what Paul said:

¹ Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things. ² We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things. ³ Do you suppose, O man—you who judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself—that you will escape the judgment of God? (Romans 2:1-3)

Here is a constant danger for me: I acknowledge my true position before God and then almost immediately begin to rationalize away this truth and say to myself, "I am not such a bad guy as _____ . . . Remember that I did . . . And I did not do what _____ did . . ." By the time I am five minutes away from my apparent point of humbling myself before God, I am back trying to build up my own holiness by my actions. Does this work? No!

My repeated effort to achieve some level of holiness in my own strength is insanity (doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result), but foolish thoughts keep giving false hope. Here is a reality check for me (and for all of us), and these verses should be tattooed on our hearts:

¹⁴ What is man, that he can be pure? Or he who is born of a woman, that he can be righteous? ¹⁵ Behold, God puts no trust in his holy ones, and the heavens are not pure in his sight; ¹⁶ how much less one who is abominable and corrupt, a man who drinks injustice like water! (Job 15:14-16)

⁴ How then can man be in the right before God? How can he who is born of woman be pure? ⁵ Behold, even the moon is not bright, and the stars are not pure in his eyes; ⁶ how much less man, who is a maggot, and the son of man, who is a worm! (Job 25:4-6)

³ This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that the same event happens to all. Also, the hearts of the children of man are full of evil, and madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead. (Ecclesiastes 9:3)

³² For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all. (Romans 11:32)

²³ For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (Romans 3:23)

⁶ All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:6)

² The godly has perished from the earth, and there is no one upright among mankind; they all lie in wait for blood, and each hunts the other

with a net.³ Their hands are on what is evil, to do it well; the prince and the judge ask for a bribe, and the great man utters the evil desire of his soul; thus they weave it together.⁴ The best of them is like a brier, the most upright of them a thorn hedge. The day of your watchmen, of your punishment, has come; now their confusion is at hand. (Micah 7:2-4)

Am I convinced yet that I have nothing good to offer to God? You may be thinking, "That may apply to Hollis, but I am much better than he is; I have never done those things he did. . . . I am not that kind of sinner." That may well be so, but your argument is not with me; it's with your Creator, who said of me and of you:

²¹ For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, ²² coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. ²³ All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person. (Mark 7:21-23)

⁹ For there is no truth in their mouth; their inmost self is destruction; their throat is an open grave; they flatter with their tongue. (Psalm 5:9)

⁹ The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it? (Jeremiah 17:9)

²⁸ And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.²⁹ They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips,³⁰ slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents,³¹ foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. (Romans 1:28-31)

⁵ The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. (Genesis 6:5)

You may yet wrestle with your sinfulness, but except for moments when I get spiritual amnesia, I know without hesitation that the vilest person I have ever known is the one staring back at me in the mirror, the one penning these words. The only way around my sinfulness is the righteousness of Christ, which is mine as a gift of God in Christ Jesus.

Lord, help me to see myself as You do, to honestly
confess my sin and know You will cleanse me of all
unrighteousness but if I deny my sin. I am making You
out to be a liar, and, Lord, I want no more of that!

CHAPTER 59

“THAT MAY BE YOUR TRUTH, BUT I HAVE A DIFFERENT BELIEF SYSTEM”

(*THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN CHRISTIANITY
AND EVERY OTHER BELIEF SYSTEM*)

“And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”

—Acts 4:12

RELIGION IS NOT A WORD I prefer to use in relation to Christianity. However, in order to explain the essential difference between Christianity and all other belief systems, I give in and say this: There are two types of religion:

1. Christianity
2. Every other belief system

This may sound simplistic, and one might make a convincing argument to that effect; however, the simple difference between Christianity and every other religion, regardless of its origin, is simply this: grace. Every religion other than Christianity has some form of system or plan whereby each person would accomplish certain things that eventually allow the person to become right with “god” by his or her efforts. Christianity is fundamentally and wholly different from any other

belief system because of grace. Grace is a gift from God. In Christianity, God gives all, and the person gives nothing, accomplishes nothing. The person is not even capable of accomplishing anything but instead is fully dependent on God—that is, on God's grace, His gift to man.

The only "god" who can really be God is a fully holy and perfect God. It is the one true God, the God of the Bible. This is not an arrogant saying but, in truth, a simple deduction. To qualify to be God, the entity must meet and exceed the categories laid out above. Anything short of each and every one of those, and "it" would not be God because "it" would be lacking in the essential qualities necessary to qualify as God. A "god" that is God can have nothing to do with someone or some thing that is not of like kind. We started off that way, but man fell—that is, man and woman fell—and there resulted a great chasm between the created (man and woman—all people of all time and for all time) and their Creator. The thought that a person could bridge that gap and solve that problem supposes that the person is capable of doing what only God is capable of. Thus, grace is the only way; there is no other way. It can only be by a gift of God that imperfect people can be made right with an all-perfect God. This is not arrogance; this is, in fact, the most logical and inescapable conclusion imaginable.

Someone (probably multiple sources) has said it like this: Every religion involves the person climbing the mountain of God by virtue of certain achievements. Christianity is a system of belief, the only one, where God comes down from the mountain to be with man; in Christianity, God becomes man so that man can be reconciled to God and live in a love relationship with God forever. There is religion, every belief system ever created by man; then there is Christianity, a belief system created completely by God for God so that God, a completely holy and perfect spirit, can be reconciled with His creation, a fallen people.

A simple overview of the mainline belief systems in relation to God might be stated as: Buddhism doesn't believe in God. Islam teaches an impersonal monotheism, Allah. The Koran states that god reveals his will but not his person. Christianity teaches a personal Trinitarianism, where God is three persons in relationship (Father-Son-Spirit) that can be known and enjoyed. Hinduism varies on this question, ranging from polytheism to atheism. This is due to the absence of definitive revelation to clarify Hindu theology. Instead, Hinduism has multiple sources of revelation (Upanishads, Vedas, etc.). Contrary to Islam,

“That May Be Your Truth, but I Have a Different Belief System”

Hinduism has no presuppositions about the nature of God. In short, religious views of God differ.

Many today argue that we (this is primarily pointed at Christians) should be tolerant and accept that all roads lead to one God. Such a belief system urges that in this new age we should all co-exist and honor all belief systems because all belief systems that are sincerely held lead to God. This is simply not true. When the mainline belief systems that exist have completely different views on whether there is a “god,” who that “god” is, whether you can even know the “god” referred to or there is a lack of definition of the “god” they seek to attain a right status with or even if such an attainment is possible or even necessary, how can you expect, much less require, those to all be in agreement? What does this bode for the argument made by those who wear the (self-adorned) ribbon of enlightenment? How can it be enlightenment to claim that all roads lead equally as well to “god” when some of the roads do not even seek “god,” some of the roads dispute the existence of a “god,” some of the roads speak of or contemplate arriving at a relationship with an impersonal “god,” and finally one speaks of a personal love relationship with a “god” it describes as the one and only true God who is all loving and manifests Himself fully to those in relationship with God. This is not enlightenment; this is flawed and failed thinking at its worse.

Hindus do not believe Buddhism is the way to God; Buddhists don’t believe Christianity is the way to God; Muslims certainly don’t accept the Christian view or any other. The only ones who believe all of this are pluralists, who essentially say to all of these major world religions, “None of your views are correct; our view, ‘that each of your beliefs is acceptable and all lead to God,’ is the one true view of religion that all must accept.” That is the absolute height of intolerance.

Christians (just like Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims) have a very distinct view of the only path to the one true God. Yet, it is neither intolerant nor unenlightened for them to feel this way; it is the logical result of a system of beliefs. By its very nature, a system of beliefs is in fact single minded; otherwise it would not be a system. Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims all have a system of beliefs that they adhere to. The only religion that doesn’t have a system of beliefs is the one that puts forth the claim that we should have a common system of beliefs among a set of belief systems that share nothing truly in common.

Christ did not demand that anyone follow Him, but instead He said, “If anyone would come after me, let him . . .” (Matthew 16:24).

Christians also should not demand that someone accept their beliefs; rather, a mature Christ follower simply says there is only one true God and there is only one way to Him, which is through the finished work of Christ. Jesus never insisted that everyone follow Him, but He clearly laid out that if a person rejects Jesus as the only way to the Father, the one making such a decision must, of necessity, be willing to accept the consequences. There is nothing intolerant or arrogant about this. This is essentially, if not exactly, what the other belief systems adhere to. They believe firmly in their system of beliefs, and if you choose a different path, you suffer the consequences of your choice.

If you believe there is another way to the one true God than Christianity, I respect your belief but ask that you also respect my belief. I am compelled to pray that you may see God for who He really is and thus inevitably see yourself as you are—just as I am—hopeless in any effort in our own strength to be reconciled or made right with the one Holy God. If you seek a “god” who is not so holy, then how could such a being be the one true God? There is no way for there to be a God who is any different from what is laid out so clearly in Part Two of this book. Anything less than God is no god! I would simply ask that you look at creation, including yourself; read the sacred Scriptures, God’s love letter to you; and ask Him to reveal Himself to you.

Lord, thank You for doing all that needs to be done to reconcile each of us to You. Draw those who are not yet at this point to You, and may they each and all come to a saving knowledge of Jesus by grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone. Amen.

CHAPTER 60

WHAT CAN I GIVE TO GOD TO BE RIGHTEOUS?

(“*NOTHING IN MY HAND I BRING, SIMPLY TO THE CROSS I CLING*”)

“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”

—Ephesians 2:8-9

WE LOVE BEING THE BENEFICIARIES of God’s grace, but we want to “help” too! If we can do a little something to help ourselves be right with God, then we have something to brag about. The verses quoted above and the ones below reveal that our righteousness is only in and through Jesus Christ. In reality, as the scriptures and hymns proclaim: “Jesus paid it all, all to Him we owe.” No matter how hard I try or how well I perform, there is nothing I can add to the finished work of Christ. Truly I must see that I bring nothing to God but my sin.

⁶ Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6)

¹² And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved. (Acts 4:12)

The natural human reaction to Christ is resentment because He is exclusive in both method and ability. We resent having to admit that we have nothing to offer, that we contribute nothing. I once would

have resented this truth, but today I deeply cherish the wonderful line from the great hymn of the faith “Rock of Ages”⁶⁴:

*Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to the cross I cling;
Naked, come to Thee for dress;
Helpless, look to Thee for grace;
Foul, I to the fountain fly;
Wash me, Savior, or I die.*

I will confess that I fought this fruitless fight to the bitter end, and that bitter end was me finally coming face-to-face with the vilest of sinners and recognizing him as my own self. So today I find my greatest joy in the sufficiency of my Savior. I will also quickly confess that I have moments daily when I feel self-righteousness rising up, and I look in the mirror and say, “Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to the cross I cling.”

There is nothing we can do, there is nothing we can offer (other than our sin) to God whereby we can be made right with Him. Paul said it so well in his letter to the church at Philippi:

¹ Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you. ² Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. ³ For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh— ⁴ though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. ⁷ But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— ¹⁰ that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. (Philippians 3:1-11)

⁶⁴ Augustus Toplady, “Rock of Ages,” 1763, third stanza.

What Can I Give to God to Be Righteous?

Back to the first two stanzas of “Rock of Ages,” which is not Scripture but is packed with scriptural truth and has been recognized by the faithful across many years:

*Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in Thee;
Let the water and the blood,
From Thy wounded side which flowed,
Be of sin the double cure;
Save from wrath and make me pure.*

*Not the labors of my hands
Can fulfill Thy law's demands;
Could my zeal no respite know,
Could my tears forever flow,
All for sin could not atone;
Thou must save, and Thou alone.*

The world may not understand and may promptly reject out of hand this statement, but for every person who is in Christ this makes the most sense: The greatest freedom and worth I ever felt is the very moment the Holy Spirit convicted me about dying to myself and living for Christ and seeing Him as my Lord and Master in all things! Kneeling at the feet of Jesus is the ultimate high; there is no higher place!

Finally, some invoking popular sentiment of the day might say something like: “Well, what if I just candidly admit that I have a problem with sin sometimes? Then I can begin to get my life straight and start going to church more regularly and maybe even sing in the choir and give some money to the church. I might even go on a mission trip or help feed some homeless people. That will surely fix this issue, and I will be on my way to God being happy with me. Don’t you agree?”

It matters not what I think but only what God has said. God has spoken, and He continues to speak to us in His dynamic living Word we call the Bible, and here is what He is saying right now:

¹Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ²This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.” ³Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the

kingdom of God.”⁴ Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?”⁵ Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.⁷ Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’⁸ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”⁹ Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?”¹⁰ Jesus answered him, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?¹¹ Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony.¹² If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.¹⁴ And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.¹⁶ For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.¹⁹ And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.²⁰ For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed.²¹ But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.” (John 3:1-21)

Let’s get this crystal clear: if you lived one hundred years and went to church every time the doors opened from birth to death; if you sang in the choir every week; if you read your Bible and prayed four hours a day; if you gave one-fourth of your income to the church and one-fourth to the poor for all one hundred years of your life; and if you left your entire estate to the church but were not born again, you would have gained nothing in God’s economy. Those are all great things, but we can do nothing to earn our place with God. God loves righteous acts by His children (He plans them and gives them to us

What Can I Give to God to Be Righteous?

so even those acts are all of God), but until we are born again by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, those actions would be completely useless in an effort at self-righteousness (a thing that does not in fact even exist). Even when we have been born again (we are in Christ), our righteous acts do not gain or secure our place with God; they are actions done in loving response to what Christ has already done, and God is honored and pleased with those. We have to fix our minds on this immutable truth that Jesus paid it all:

⁶ For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—⁸ but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. ⁹ Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. ¹⁰ For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. ¹¹ More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation. (Romans 5:6-11)

Jesus Paid It All⁶⁵

*I hear the Savior say,
"Thy strength indeed is small;
Child of weakness, watch and pray,
Find in Me thine all in all."*

REFRAIN

*Jesus paid it all,
All to Him I owe;
Sin had left a crimson stain,
He washed it white as snow.*

*For nothing good have I
Whereby Thy grace to claim;
I'll wash my garments white
In the blood of Calv'ry's Lamb.*

REFRAIN

65 Elvina M. Hall, "Jesus Paid It All," 1865.

*And now complete in Him
My robe, His righteousness,
Close sheltered 'neath His side,
I am divinely blest.*

REFRAIN

*Lord, now indeed I find
Thy pow'r, and Thine alone,
Can change the leper's spots
And melt the heart of stone.*

REFRAIN

*When from my dying bed
My ransomed soul shall rise,
"Jesus died my soul to save,"
Shall rend the vaulted skies.*

REFRAIN

*And when before the throne
I stand in Him complete,
I'll lay my trophies down,
All down at Jesus' feet.*

REFRAIN

⁸If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:8-9)

Father, may I finally and fully see that there is nothing I could ever put in my hand to bring to You that will suffice to cover my sin. "Jesus paid it all, all to Him I owe. Sin had left a crimson stain; He washed it white as snow."

CHAPTER 6I

WHY WE CAN'T FIX OUR OWN SIN PROBLEM

(*THE BACKSTORY BEHIND OUR INABILITY TO BE RIGHT WITH GOD ON OUR OWN*)

"Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me."

—Psalm 51:5

WE ARE BORN IN SIN, and we are “stained” for life. We have no way to clean ourselves up; we have nothing by which we can ever remove the sin stain from our lives. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.”⁶⁶ The first step in truly trusting in Christ is to know that we absolutely have to have Him and He does not need us at all. In other words, He has all that is needed and we have nothing. This is why Peter answered Jesus’ question: “You do not want to leave too, do you?” by saying, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (John 6:67-68, NIV).

On our best day with our very best self-effort, all we can do on our own is produce more sin. Our flesh is dead, and all that flesh can produce is more flesh; the things of God are the things of the Spirit.

⁶⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. (John 3:6)

66 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (London: SCM Press, 1959).

¹⁷ For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. ¹⁹ Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, ²¹ envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. ²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. ²⁴ And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. (Galatians 5:17-24)

There is no human method or standard of living humanly possible that can make us right with God. So, in love, God sent His only Son to die in our place—to give us life. The people who were present and listening to Jesus were already alive physically, but Jesus instead referenced a spiritual life when He said to them, “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). He was not speaking of our physical life but our spiritual life—both here and now and in eternity. In fact, all of God’s Word is the wonderful story of how God created us and loves us and wants to have a love relationship with us through Christ Jesus.

To be in relationship with God was His very reason for creating us, and God has been pursuing us in relationship for thousands of years and He still is today. He pursues us because He loves us, and this is how much God loves you and me:

¹⁶ For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

We do not pursue God (nor can we); He is the one pursuing us in this love relationship:

⁴⁴ No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day. (John 6:44)

¹⁹ We love because he first loved us. (1 John 4:19)

We have to understand our true condition before God, which is exactly what Jesus referenced when He said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:3). To be “poor in spirit” is to know we absolutely need a Savior. Jesus said it is not the people who are well—there are no people who are “well” (free from sin) apart from the finished work of Jesus Christ; there are just those

Why We Can't Fix Our Own Sin Problem

who think themselves to be well—but it is those who are sick that He came to save. In other words, He came to save those who know they have a desperate need for the one true Savior, Jesus Christ.

Here is the truth for each of us: we can do all things through Christ, but away from Him we can do nothing (Philippians 4:13; John 15:5). Our sin gives rise to our need for a Savior. Each of us has sinned and fallen short of God's standard of perfect holiness (Romans 3:23), and if for some reason we claim not to have sinned, we are lying and there is no truth in us. But if we confess and admit our sin, God steps right in and cleans us up completely (1 John 1:9).

So we learn to live the way Paul described:

¹⁶ Yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified. (Galatians 2:16)

²⁰ I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Galatians 2:20)

We learn that life is really lived when we “die” spiritually and live trusting in Jesus Christ. When we come to the end of ourselves and see how foolish it is to rely on our righteousness and instead trust that God is the real answer, we can say, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” like the poor tax collector in this parable told by Jesus:

¹⁰ Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: “God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.” ¹³ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” ¹⁴ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted. (Luke 18:10-14)

So, God loves me and you so much He sent His only Son to die that we might be brought into relationship with Him. He has done all that is necessary for our relationship; we just have to reach the place where we finally know that we are completely dependent upon God. We are all “prodigal” sons and daughters, and He is waiting with gracious open arms for those of us who recognize our position, like the son in this story told by Jesus:

¹⁸ “I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.’” ²⁰ And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. ²¹ And the son said to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” ²² But the father said to his servants, “Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. ²³ And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. ²⁴ For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.” And they began to celebrate. (Luke 15:18-24)

An honest look at myself reminds me, and all of us, that “My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness. i dare not trust the sweetest frame, but wholly lean on Jesus’ name.”

WAYPOINT #9:

FINISHING THE RACE

THE BEST FOR LAST! THIS is the part I have been waiting to get to: how then shall we now live for Christ as we finish our race? When I look back, I can't help but think it appears that I tried hard not to get this far, yet this is the best part of life. No, it's not the easiest part; some parts don't work well and some seemingly not at all. I have recently been suffering from what the medical field calls "major depression," and this has been a real challenge. None of that diminishes this truth—I can do all things through Christ Jesus, and as I look to Him, I know how to live in plenty and in want, and as I trust Him, He directs my steps along a path of peace that is far beyond my understanding.

PART FOUR

ALL IN
(GOD WANTS
ALL OF US)

CHAPTER 62

THE LORD SPEAKS TO ME AGAIN

(*BUT WOULD I OBEY?*)

"And the LORD came and stood, calling as at other times, 'Samuel! Samuel!' And Samuel said, 'Speak, for your servant hears.'"

—1 Samuel 3:10

GOD SPEAKS TO ALL OF US all the time in many different ways. He speaks in His creation (Romans 1:20), He speaks to us in His Word (2 Timothy 3:16), He speaks to us through prayer, and He speaks to us in other ways. God is speaking to us right now, and He has been speaking continuously throughout all of time. God speaks to all of us in commands such as "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind . . . and love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:37, 39). God spoke and the world was created. God has spoken to us ever since creation, and He is still speaking now. There never has been a problem with God speaking; the question is simply this: "Have we been and are we now listening?"

God has spoken very directly to me three times. God first spoke to me when I was twelve years old at a youth revival service in Meadville, Mississippi. God next spoke to me thirty-four years later at a Methodist church in Copiah County, Mississippi. The third time God spoke to me was on December 17, 2016, while I was driving and praying on my way to New Orleans. Each time God has spoken, He was specifically telling me what He required of me at that time. The first

time I said “yes” but did not follow through. The second time I said “yes” and partially obeyed God. The third time God spoke to me, fifty years after He first spoke, I said, “Yes, Lord,” and I daily ask God to help me live that out.

In the spring of 1966,⁶⁷ there was a special youth revival at the Baptist church in my hometown of Meadville, Mississippi. I attended the services, and on one of the nights (I don’t recall how many nights it lasted), I came under deep conviction and answered God’s call to the altar and then His call to salvation. I became keenly aware that I was a sinner, that my sin separated me from God, and that Jesus was the bridge. In essence, I heard the revivalist (Gary Googe, if I recall his name correctly) say, “Life is short, death is certain, sin is your problem, and Jesus is the cure.” I went to the altar, knelt before Almighty God, and confessed Jesus as Lord and received Him as Savior; I confessed my sin and was cleansed thoroughly by the blood of Jesus shed on Calvary’s cross. I never felt cleaner than I did at that moment. I was weeping tears of joy, I truly felt God’s amazing grace, and I knew I was free in ways I did not understand but felt the freedom very pointedly.

God continued to speak to me at the altar, and He called me to be a pastor at that very moment. He said my life was no longer my own; I was to follow Him. In the very moment God spoke, I was in full agreement. I remained in that frame of mind for some time. There came a time later when I did some self-talk and reminded myself that I had always wanted to be a lawyer. Then I did very pointedly what characterizes the entire rest of my life—I did what Hollis wanted to do! I chose “drinking” over “preaching.” In essence, the “drinking” phase of life lasted for the next twenty-one years—through the cataclysmic events of 1987 that ushered in a new period of “preaching.”

Thirty-four years after the youth revival, God spoke to me again in June 2000. I was a Chancery Court Judge over a four-county district in southwest Mississippi (Amite, Franklin, Pike, and Walthall Counties); I had opened a restaurant, The Homochitto (where I was the primary cook three nights a week); Prudence and I had three young children. Just a few

67 This date is arrived at by my memory (from fifty-one years ago) that it was when I was twelve and it was spring because we were playing Little League baseball. My lifelong friend Bill Sullivan was sitting with me when I went down to the altar, and Bill went too. We played baseball together for the Meadville Cardinals, and that is how those memories all tie in.

The Lord Speaks to Me Again

weeks into the restaurant business,⁶⁸ Ron Barham, the District Superintendent of the Methodist Church, was in The Homochitto eating, and he asked me if I “could do another one of those jobs” for him. I knew what he meant; I had filled in for pastors at a couple of different churches, once when the pastor had surgery and another time when a pastor resigned suddenly for personal reasons. I said, “Ron, my plate is pretty full, but if you need me to help, I will.” His response was simply, “Meet me in Brookhaven next Wednesday about five in the afternoon, and I will take you up to meet the people at the church where I need your help.”

The following Wednesday I went to Brookhaven and met Ron at his house. I was feeling good that Ron trusted me to fill in for him at another church and looked forward to serving for a few weeks (he had not mentioned anything about how long he needed me). I knew the name Beauregard as being just above Wesson, where I went one year to junior college at Copiah-Lincoln Junior College, but I don’t think I had ever actually been into Beauregard. Ron and I were visiting, meaning I was mostly listening to Ron, as we drove the relatively short drive from Brookhaven to Beauregard. When we came into Beauregard (following the old highway—the back way in) and we got to the place where we literally were in sight of the church, Ron changed the subject and said, “We are going to have a covenant meeting.” I swallowed hard and said, “Ron, *covenant* is a big word for filling in.” Ron then said, “Hollis, I may not have told you the whole story here. The pastor here (Linwood McClain) is leaving; they really love him a lot, and this move is not what the church wants. But I have to have someone to replace him, and that would be you, my friend.”

I was basically speechless as we walked into the beautiful old sanctuary at Beauregard, and there was the pastor at the pulpit with a guitar and he was singing! I couldn’t preach, I couldn’t play a guitar, I sure couldn’t sing, I had two other full-time jobs, and I lived fifty miles from this church. Nervous and unsettled are major understatements of how I felt at that moment. Ron introduced me to the pastor, a wonderful and godly man, and then led me into the fellowship hall where a group of men and women (the Pastor Parish Relations Committee) were gathered around a table, no doubt lamenting the loss of

68 My father, Mayes McGehee, literally begged me not to go into the restaurant business. He pleaded with me, but I refused to listen. This was a mistake that contributed largely to a subsequent personal and financial meltdown. I wanted a restaurant, and I was not going to let anyone tell me “no”!

their beloved pastor and wondering who in the world would be next. I settled into a chair and began the process of being introduced to this group of inquisitive strangers who wanted to know all about who I was and why I was there.

There came a point in the covenant meeting when one of the leaders, Adrian Hyatt, looked at me with gentle but piercing eyes and with a deep voice inquired of me, "Brother McGehee, do you believe God called you to Beauregard?" How could I answer that without sounding flippant? I bought time by asking a question: "Brother Hyatt, is that right?" "Yes, sir." I answered honestly from my heart with great joy and tears brimming in my eyes: "Brother Hyatt, I did not know where this church was an hour ago, but I can tell you as I have sat in this room with all of you, I have never been more sure of anything in my life than that I am finally in the right place." I knew at that moment in the deepest part of my being that I was doing what God had put me on earth to do, to be a pastor, to be a servant to God by serving other people. I felt the same way I had felt on that night thirty-four years earlier: I felt clean, I felt at home, I felt a purpose and meaning to my life that transcended anything I had ever felt before as a lawyer or a judge. God gives us these moments in time when we know that we know that we know . . . the question then becomes "Will you honor God in this?"

Those people gathered around that table and those in the sanctuary were almost instantly family and deeply loved by me. They are and continue to be deeply loved by me to this day, though some of them have graduated, including Brother Adrian Hyatt, one of the most godly and deeply rooted Christian men God ever put in my path. But again I did not fully embrace what God was saying. I allowed my job, things others said, and life to convince me that I could "preach and drink"—that I could have it my way and God's way. That has never worked, and it will never work. Not now, not ever, not for me, not for anyone. There is only one way, and that is God's way. Now, we are not all called to serve as a pastor, but we are all called to serve God with our whole heart, and as good as I felt about where I was, I continued with a divided mind and heart. The thing I didn't know (or would not admit to myself) is that a divided heart is a heart pulling away from God, and it will land you in the ditch ten times out of ten. Jesus said it like this: "No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money" (Matthew 6:24).

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I served at Beauregard for several years, and if I had followed God's leading in my heart, I would be there, Ebenezer, Benndale, or wherever God placed me to pastor to this day. "But Hollis" trumped "but God" (not ultimately, but in the moment); I got in the way, and I thought, "Well since I have to have this other job and since my family lives in Meadville and they do not want to move, I will move to a church closer to home." Thus I came to Ebenezer United Methodist Church and to yet another group of wonderful loving men and women and children who are to this day a part of my heart. Subsequently I went to Benndale and served Antioch and Pine Grove, where I met yet another group of incredibly loving and accepting people. I must say that at some deep level I do not pretend to understand, even in my failures (the failures were all mine and none of God) God was in control and what has come has reason and purpose; I know that and I am settled in my mind with that. We are in a hallway called life, and God brings us to a door and either we trust Him and go in or we refuse and God eventually brings us to another door. The road not taken is not somewhere we can spend our time, but I know there was a road I missed at Beauregard and I just have to leave that to God.

Fifty years after the first door opened for me at Meadville Baptist in 1966, God spoke to me a third time. One week before Christmas 2016, I was driving to New Orleans, which from my home, a small cabin on Black Creek in Forest County, Mississippi, is about one hundred miles. My goal was to meet up with the ladies from Light of Hope Ministries to minister to people living outside in New Orleans. I was serving as a senior status judge for the state, and I worked on Saturdays with people living on the streets of New Orleans.

Traveling south down Interstate 59 with about an hour to go to Vintage Church, God spoke to me for the third time in my life. I am honored to hear God's voice, and even though it's been fifty years since the first time God spoke, I recognized His voice instantly. Now, God speaks to me many times every day through Scripture, prayer, songs, people, and in various other ways. His words are always clear, but His "voice" in giving direction, on this third time and the two others, was different: both authoritative and unmistakable. God spoke and convicted me of the righteousness and the reality of His call; His voice penetrated down to the cellular level of my spirit. On each of these three occasions, the voice of God was a very different voice than the voice He uses in my daily contact with Him. This was a voice I had

only heard twice before, and I knew instantly what was happening. God was bringing me to the same door He brought me to in 1966 and in 2000. God was giving me another chance to respond to His call on my life. This time, without hesitating or wavering, I said, "Yes, Lord," and I meant it with all that I am and all that I have. I knew this meant I had to immediately set aside my job as senior status judge; I knew I had to immediately set aside the only active income I had and follow Jesus. I did not hesitate. This time I really got it. Finally, fifty years later, I was truly ready to listen to God and respond right away.

That very night I drafted a letter to the Chief Justice of the Mississippi Supreme Court, Honorable William L. Waller Jr., who gave me the blessing of serving as a senior status judge to preside over and rule on some of the more difficult, challenging, controversial, and publicized cases the state had during my years in that position. I just plainly and simply told the Chief (who I have known for more than forty years and who I know to be a strong Christian) that God had called again and this time I must answer; my answer must be yes and it must be now. I told him that I regretted any problem or inconvenience this may cause, but I have to drop my nets, pick up my cross, and follow Jesus. Monday I sent the letter to the Chief, and I wrote a number of other court personnel and attorneys and immediately and fully severed my connection to the judiciary and the legal system.

God blessed the commitment in my heart with a deep and abiding peace. Going from "All rise for the honorable . . ." and having a paying job to ministering on the streets of New Orleans to the "least of these" has been nothing less than a wonderful gift from God. I am totally at ease knowing I am right where God placed me, doing what He placed me here to do at this hour, and all of the rest is just details. God has a way of confirming things that, to me, is as clear as His call. In my experience it is not that God gives me something; He imparts to me a clear sense of His presence, purpose, and peace. Forty years of busyness ended with that letter: the phone was quiet, and my countless daily lawyer e-mails just stopped. There was no anxiousness about any of this; instead there was an eagerness to hear what God had next because I could feel it in my bones that He had something else. The "something else" is simply Him! I hear Jesus calling me, saying: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

There is nothing that even comes close to that feeling—it is as if the very molecules of your makeup have been spiritually re-engineered to

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line up into the peace that passes all understanding (Philippians 4:7). When we find our delight in what He delights in, we find a delight that cannot be matched by any physical experience in this world. Immediately there were opportunities to minister to people who were there all along, but they were lost or missed by me due to my busyness.

My prayers felt immediately richer, and I had the sense that I was closer to God than ever before. God is always just right there, and He has promised (and He always keeps His promises) never to leave us, yet as soon as I acted on a full commitment to God, it felt as if we had become roommates! Now, God had been there all along, but I was on a journey to a far country and was too busy with the things of this world to be as aware of God's presence as I am now. Let me be clear, we do not have to quit a job to find God; we just have to say "yes" fully and finally to His will, His way, and His time—responding like Abraham did: he trusted and obeyed promptly and thoroughly.

¹ After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." ² He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you." ³ So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. ⁴ On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar. ⁵ Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you." ⁶ And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. (Genesis 22:1-6)

God promptly and thoroughly showed me confirmation that my decision was the right decision. God confirmed the decision to me by reassuring me not to be anxious about my life, about my clothes, about my shelter, that He would provide for me if I just put Him first. He said to me: "But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you" (Matthew 6:33).

God spoke a third time, and I listened—I trusted and obeyed promptly. A few weeks into "Yes, Lord, Your will be done," while on a daily walk in the woods, I felt God leading me to make the following commitment, which I recorded in my daily journal:

Prayer Circle of My Life

Lord, at 10:12 am on 1.9.17 in a circle drawn by my walking staff under the big-cone pine tree on Black Creek Trail in De Soto National Forest, I declare:

I am Yours!
All I am
All I have
All of my hopes and dreams
All of my resources
All of my gifts
I am Yours!
Turn me inside out for You—Your kingdom, Your glory
All of me
Please take all of me
Can't I see I am nothing without You
I give You the part that once was my heart—please receive
all of me
I want nothing but to do Your will
Lord, help me to not look back
May the rest of my earthly life be a circle of prayer leading
up to heaven
May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my
heart be pleasing and acceptable to you
Lord, I call this tree and this circle and all who read this as
witnesses against me if all that I am and all that I have and all
of my days are not committed to You. In Jesus' name, amen.

God the Father was not a reluctant creator; He held back nothing in creation—He went all in to create a magnificently beautiful and perfectly suited universe for us. Abraham did not hold back anything when he laid it all on the line with God and obeyed as he offered his son Isaac as a sacrifice. Jesus held back nothing when He became sin that you and I might become the righteousness of God in Christ Jesus because of what He did for us. God's call on us is to offer ourselves—all that we have and all that we are—withholding nothing.

These blessings continue day by day, but I also am experiencing some resistance against my commitment. This is no surprise; Jesus

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told us, "In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). We read in Peter's epistle: "For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps" (1 Peter 2:21).

The challenges are not to be seen as something to shrink back from; no, we must embrace them and know that if Jesus suffered greatly, we will surely suffer some challenges along the way. We have to let go of the worldly view that everything going our way is the desirable path; instead, we need to embrace a whole new way of thinking. Paul lived it and said it so well when he proclaimed:

⁷ But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.⁸ Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—¹⁰ that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,¹¹ that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. (Philippians 3:7-11)



Prayer:

Lord, thank You for Your faithfulness and patience with me. I thank You that You are patient with all of us; You have a perfect plan and will for each person, and when we miss Your direction, You just repeat it until we get it or we pass on. I thank You for Your third call, and Lord, by Your grace, I have decided to follow Jesus, no turning back. Amen.

LORD, WE GIVE OURSELVES TO YOU. WE
WERE NEVER OUR OWN—WE ARE YOURS.

CHAPTER 63

GOD'S AMAZING GRACE AT WORK

"Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us."

—Romans 5:2-5

THERE ARE MANY RELIGIONS IN the world, but there is only one Christianity—and the defining difference is grace. No other belief system has grace, and grace is everything to a Christian. Grace is God's provision that gives life, breath, daily bread, and salvation through Jesus Christ alone. I know it is God's grace that allows me to even still be here to sit and write these very words; that I am here, that God allows me to be used for His glory, that I have a clear mind to be able to write and the desire to write for God's glory, even the very breath that I now draw—all testify to the ongoing grace of God in my life. So it is with every one of us, only by God's grace.

Likewise, it is God's grace that allows us to go through things, and no matter how difficult they may be, God works in our difficulties to accomplish God-sized results.

²⁸ And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

²⁹ For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. (Romans 8:28-29)

God's grace is at work, calling me and sustaining me through all of the tragedy and shame detailed in this book. God is working all of it together for my good and His glory as He shapes and molds me into the image of Jesus. Behind only the message of salvation (Waypoint #1), if you miss everything else in this book, please do not miss this word to all born-again Christians:

GOD LOVES YOU IMMEASURABLY.
GOD IS FOR YOU.
NO MATTER WHAT HAPPENS, GOD IS BIGGER
THAN OUR CIRCUMSTANCES.
GOD IS WITH YOU.
GOD IS FOR YOU.

³¹ What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? (Romans 8:31)

Do you remember the question Officer Gerry Crawford asked me on May 26, 2008? "What have you done to yourself?" This question has echoed in my mind for ten years since that day when I was tased twice and arrested in downtown McComb, Mississippi. What indeed had I done to myself? Why did I wind up in that neutral ground on my knees and handcuffed? Why had I gone from being a respected public servant to a shamed public drunk? That big question—"What happened?"—was the driving force behind the writing of Part One of this book. Over all these years I have asked the Lord to give me a chance to meet and speak with this officer who prophetically and powerfully spoke that haunting question into my heart and spirit.

The answer to the question "Why?" is now before me: I had not honored authority in my life from my earliest childhood. I resisted authority and usually did things "my way." The ultimate rejection of authority was my failure to honor God when He saved me by His grace and placed His firm call on my life in the spring of 1966. Eighteen thousand five hundred and twenty-three long days went by from then until I said, "Yes, Lord," on December 17, 2016. Through all of those long days and nights, God has allowed me to go my way; He has allowed me to make foolish choices and take my own path to my own

peril and the harm of others. Yet in all of that, in the way only God can and does, He preserved my life and He (like the father in the Prodigal Son story in Luke 15) kept an eye out for me, and the minute I arose from my pigpen and said “yes,” He met me and embraced me and blessed me in many, many ways.

Today, instead of being an “officer of the court,” instead of people rising when I come into the room, instead of being called “Your Honor,” I work the streets of New Orleans helping the homeless. I go down into the lowest part of the low of society and see there the very people Jesus came to help—“the least of these.” I have no title, I have less “stuff” than ever before in my life, and in the place of all of that, I have the peace of knowing I am finally seeking to follow God’s lead, honoring His authority rather than doing things “my way.” The grace of God is the key to seeking to live a Christ-centered existence—walking daily in the grace of God and enjoying the peace of God!

¹ Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. ² Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. ³ More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴ and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵ and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. (Romans 5:1-5)

A few weeks ago I was driving near my home, and I came to a low-water crossing; I stopped my old jeep in the water, kicked off my shoes, and stepped out into the cool waters flowing over the concrete bed of the crossing. The feeling of that cool water running delightfully over and under my feet and between my bare toes was exquisite indeed. Yet, nothing in all of creation, other than Christ Himself, is as delightful and sweet as daily standing in the grace of God. God’s grace is immeasurable in provision and indescribable in power. The only thing I can say in response to grace is this woefully inadequate expression: “Wow, God! You are something else!”

In February 2017, my longtime friend James Brumfield called and asked if I would come and speak to his men’s group in Progress, Mississippi. I immediately and without hesitation said “yes.” James went on to say, “Hollis, I need to let you know that Gerry Crawford is in my group; will that cause you any discomfort?” I said, “James, not only would it not cause me any discomfort, it is God answering a prayer

long prayed." A few days later I spoke to that group, and the reunion with retired MHP Officer Crawford was for me a joyous occasion and a God-ordained meeting to openly thank him (and other officers) for doing their job and especially to thank Gerry for asking that question: "What have you done to yourself?" A few days after that, at Gerry's request, James and Gerry came to Black Creek, and we all spent the day together, walking the trail, talking, praying, laughing, making fishing plans, and eating some good food. As Mark Batterson said, "You can't never always sometimes tell what God is about to do."⁶⁹

Since committing fully to God on December 17, 2016, I have not passed a single day when God has not opened new doors to help someone, to extend a hand to someone who is down, to write notes of love and concern to people in difficult circumstances, to be invited to come and speak to a group, to be used by God in various and many ways. God has opened my heart and mind to see the depth of my wrong attitudes (as outlined in the painfully written chapters documenting my disrespect to God, my family, and other people) and to be open about them and know that when I am at my weakest, God is at His strongest in my life.

AMAZING GRACE
HOW SWEET THE SOUND
THAT SAVED A WRETCH LIKE ME.

69 Mark Batterson, *The Circle Maker* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011).

CHAPTER 64

HOW THEN SHALL I LIVE?

“He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

—Micah 6:8

THIS IS A QUESTION FOR me; this is also a question for you: “What now?” How then shall we live our lives from this moment forward? If God created us, sent His Son to die in order to save us from our own sin, and daily gives us grace to live and move and have our being—how then shall we live our lives before this wonderful, all-powerful, all-knowing, ever-loving and never-changing God?

First, we need to know that He is God.

¹⁰ Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth! (Psalm 46:10)

God calls us to love and honor Him, but He does not need us to honor Him. He is honored and shall ever be. He is Creator, and His creation honors Him in and of itself: every glistening pine needle, every craggy rock, every loaded blueberry bush, every bounding deer, every horse running wild across the grassy plain, every smile that is smiled, every cry that is cried. All that is proclaims the majesty and the glory and the honor of the One who created all and is over all. God is honored by His creation even when He is not honored by mankind, the very crown of His creation. How can I not join with the roses, the giant sequoia trees, the ants, and the morning light in declaring my

Maker's praise? With my mouth will I make known Thy faithfulness, beauty, majesty, mercy, grace, love, and provision, O Lord.

When we say this is the day that the Lord has made, may we live the day knowing it is a precious creation unique unto itself and given to us by God. May we make choices that honor God first in our thoughts, for from the thoughts spring all of our words and actions; so our duty is to be careful and intentional with our minds—what we think about.

⁸ Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. (Philippians 4:8)

Everything true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent, and worthy of praise is from God, so we should have our thoughts crowded, even filled, with the things of God. When we are thinking these God-created and God-given thoughts and principles, our conversations will be God-honoring and a light to those listening. While we think on God's words, we can be sure that grace will abound.

²⁹ Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. (Ephesians 4:29)

Whether we are speaking or doing, we do all of it before Almighty God and for Him. We can do good only because God has first enabled us to do good, and so we give honor and thanks to God for the good things we do.

¹⁷ And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Colossians 3:17)

Life is a gift from God, and each moment of our lives is sacred. We honor God, we help others, and we live rich, full, and meaningful lives when we recognize the preciousness of each sacred breath, thought, word, and action. God has given us life and called us to live our lives centered in Christ in every way. I can think of sacred moments as simple as how I respond to other drivers at a four-way stop (allowing the other to go first) and as complicated as a moment in the mountains of Honduras when I watched Dr. Bo Gabbert gather a very sick and very contagious lonely man up in his arms and hug him closely—reassuring and reminding him of God's perfect love. There were many

reasons and excuses not to embrace this sacred moment, but it was a life changer for the man who was sick and for all who were in the room. I will never forget that sacred moment. Living life for God is living life in the moment because each moment stands on its own—this very moment is a sacred moment. I want us to think about what sacred moments might look like:

- You are in a hotel in a city far from your home when you step onto the elevator and are face-to-face with someone you have never seen before.
- You are at the check-in counter at your doctor's office; you feel very poorly; the receptionist is involved in a conversation on her cell phone and it does not sound like clinic business; you are tired and ready to be waited on.
- You are in the grocery store, and you turn down the next aisle and find yourself face-to-face with someone who appears to have a very poor attitude.
- You are at a four-way stop, and you make eye contact with the driver across from you.
- You are at the bedside of a friend who is seriously ill and feeling very overwhelmed.
- Your teenage child has just shared a major life event with you that would be the last thing you ever wanted to hear from your child.

These are each and all sacred moments, a point in time that will be only once and never again. How do we handle these moments?

- You know when you step off the elevator, you will almost surely never see this person again in this life. This may be the most sacred moment of all; you have one chance to give to this person what God has placed inside of you: a warm smile, a kind word, and a keen awareness of how they respond and if there is any opening to share something infinitely better.
- There are many ideas that occur to you on how you might respond to the receptionist; there is only one right response: patience and kindness delivered in love.
- Why does this person despise shopping? It could be that everyone is in a hurry and has their head down and doesn't seem

to notice, much less care, how anyone else is doing. This is the sacred moment to let your light shine—gently and brightly.

- Show the other driver that kindness does not operate on a stopwatch mentality; smile warmly and wave them ahead first with a palm turned gently upward.
- Even in the midst of life's most challenging moments, we tend to be mired in thoughts of our own lives and circumstances. Wipe your mind clean of any thought but loving the precious person in front of you and let them know you are not put off by their illness but you love and honor them for the person they have always been. Do not fail to offer to pray, and if you are granted permission to pray out loud (hopefully you have been praying internally since before you arrived), do it right then and ask God to lead you in how to pray.
- What are the things God can say to us about the ways we have let Him down in huge ways? This is a chance to be like the father of the Prodigal Son (just as God does with us every single day!); listen and let your child know that nothing in all creation can separate them from your love. Even if there is a moral failure that must be dealt with, don't let it be at this sacred moment—this one is for love. The father (God) in the Prodigal Son parable (see Luke 15) may very well have had some intense time- and resource-management conversations with the Prodigal Son, but first he welcomed him home with love.

Each one of these moments represents specific sacred moments I recall from my life; I feel sure you can identify with them as well. The nature of the moment is not what makes it sacred; it is the Maker of the moment that makes it sacred! When a moment passes, we never get it back. There is only one chance to be who God called you to be. Living our lives the way God calls us to is not us working hard to be better people—it is dying to self and living in Christ.

⁵ I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. (John 15:5)

I recall an event where I was running a little soup kitchen in McComb, Mississippi. I was feeling “quite filled with myself,” and a young lady (who had just come in and seated herself at one of the tables) made a comment to me as I passed: “You don’t expect me to

eat at this nasty table?" I felt the heat rise from inside of me, and I was poised to "give her a piece of my mind" but didn't. I went into the kitchen, thought of who I am really serving (Christ Himself⁷⁰). I then went back out and knelt beside the table, welcomed the lady, and thanked her for bringing the condition of the table to my attention as I carefully cleaned the area around her. This was a sacred moment—I was encountering the "woman at the well" just as Jesus did (John 4).

¹⁴ Do everything without complaining or arguing, ¹⁵ so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe ¹⁶ as you hold out the word of life—in order that I may boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor for nothing. (Philippians 2:14-16, NIV84)

This day, this hour, this very moment is a sacred moment because it is created by God, it is given to us by God, and it is to be used for His glory and His honor. So, in every moment of life, we must continually be in a mode of giving thanks. In each moment, we must be alert to its sacredness and how we can honor God in the sacred moment. Whether we are encountering traffic on the freeway, interacting with others as we go through the grocery store, observing and responding to a message, looking into the eyes of an older person who is intimidated by the bustle of all around them, holding the hand of a child who does not know what exactly to think of the vast world around them, speaking to a co-worker who is very difficult to be around—much less to love, or responding to a friend or spouse who has just said or done something we perceive as stepping on our last nerve—every one of these is a sacred moment. We will pass through this moment only this one time for all of time and eternity; we will have only one chance to get this right, and there will never, ever be a do-over of this moment. Love in the moment. Rest in the moment. Relish the moment. Pause in the moment. Continue loving in the moment, honoring God with thoughts and words and actions that are pleasing in His sight and a blessing to those we encounter in that moment. If we belong to Christ, we will never, ever be sad in reflecting back on a moment in which we were a conduit of His love, and we will always and forever regret a response that is anything other than Christlike.

⁷⁰ Matthew 25:40 says, "As you did it to one of the least of these brothers, you did it to me."

This day may look like the rest of your days. It may seem that life has become one long repetition of the same thing over and over again. It is not; God's mercies "are new every morning" (Lamentations 3:23), and His new mercies encountering you and your circumstances create a completely unique day and unique and precious opportunities in the day and the moment. In the same way that objects are transformed by how the light hits them at different times, so are our days transformed in how God's mercy encounters and engages our lives each and every day. Do not look at what others are saying or doing; look up and see and rejoice in the mercy and grace pouring into your life and know that this is a new moment and that God has new mercy that will, when we acknowledge and yield to Him, transform us into a fresh and new creation we have never been before. Think of it as an artesian well of God's presence and mercy and grace that refreshes, renews, restores, and actually creates a new you as you acknowledge and receive Him in the moment. This may seem like a hard thing, but it is not hard—it is just new to us. Nothing is easier than breathing; we do nothing to make it happen. If we will turn our hearts and minds to God, just as our breath comes naturally to us (albeit a gift from God for every one of us), so the re-creation of who we are will come naturally as we stand under the waterfall of His daily mercy and grace and presence.

²⁴ This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. (Psalm 118:24)

It was not for nothing that God made this day; it was for everything Christ centered that He made it. May we open our hearts to what He wants to do and is doing in the day and live it as the sacred day, sacred hour, sacred moment that it is; nothing will ever be more joyful to us than a moment lived with our hearts open to God's creative and transforming presence and purpose.

GOD MADE US ALL ON PURPOSE, FOR A
PURPOSE—HIS PURPOSE. WE NEED TO
BE ABOUT THE BUSINESS OF GOD.

CHAPTER 65

WANTING TO FIT IN, TO BE A PART OF THE TEAM

"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another."

—Galatians 5:22-26

WHEN YOU DON'T MAKE THE Meadville Cardinals Little League baseball team and you are still willing to show up every day and hang out with the guys who did, that is a serious level of wanting to be a part of something. This writing has caused me to see how much of my life was influenced by wanting to fit in. As the *Cheers* theme song says so well, "Sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name, and they're always glad you came."⁷¹

This is not a feeling that is unique to me nor a big new novel idea, yet I didn't realize how strongly I felt about this until I forced myself to take this look at my life. I realize that over and over I tried different things to find a spot to fit in. Some of those efforts were very good things, and I learned a lot from them:

⁷¹ Gary Portnoy and Judy Hart Angelo, "Where Everybody Knows Your Name," 1982.

Wanting to Fit In, to Be a Part of the Team

- The Meadville Cardinals Little League baseball team. I treasured being with the guys, just to belong.
- Piano lessons with Mrs. Moore and Mrs. Pauline Corban. I was approximately as successful with the piano as I was with the baseball team (no, I was better at baseball), but here is the thing—I remember how they made me feel so welcome and always seemed to be glad I came. I felt like I belonged there even if the piano playing wasn't so hot.
- I remember walking around town in Meadville, hunting for a job when I was ten or eleven years old. No one would give me a job, and then my mother said, "What about Mr. Aldridge's meat market?" I resisted but then went anyway. He sat me down and talked to me like I was somebody. He definitely made me feel like he knew my name and was very glad I came. I kept that little job until I got out of high school. Mr. Brad-dye Aldridge and Mrs. Ollie, his wife, made me a part of their family and loved me and taught me many life lessons under the pretense of me "helping him."
- Boy Scouts of America. I loved the Boy Scouts; you always felt like you belonged, and there were men to guide you and they seemed to be—and in most instances were—very interested in you and your life. I recently connected with my Scout Master Mr. Johnny Warnock, who took a lot of time with all of us very challenging boys. I was led by his and others' example to become a Scout Master myself for quite a few years.
- The Duckheads intramural sports team. When I was in law school, we had an intramural dynasty for a short time, and I still cherish my Duckhead teammates. It was a place where I felt like I belonged.
- Then there were the bars, where people may know your name and you feel welcome. There were always people giving the illusion that you were being received in a way you didn't think you were somewhere else.
- Relationships are often an effort to find a place where the other person is happy to see you and welcomes you back.

Feeling like you are a part of something—that you are respected, appreciated, welcomed, and maybe even loved—is a compelling thing. There are many instances where I have (where we all have)

sought to fit into a group that is quite okay, and there are others where the group is definitely not okay.

There is an underlying problem with all of our efforts to fit in, and here is that problem: in the end it does not work in the way we thought, hoped, and wanted it to. We are dealing with people, and people will always let us down. We are all fallen creatures; on our very best days we are not ever going to be able to really meet the needs of other people. Even if we seem to be able to do that for a season, it is an effort that is misguided from its inception. There is no relationship where one of the participants is able to meet all the needs of the others. We can be teammates, helpmates, partners, and spouses, but we can never be the answer to the needs of the other(s). It was never our job to be the answer to someone's ultimate needs in life.

When I think about the Homochitto River (as well as countless other bodies of water that I have enjoyed, including living on Black Creek today) and my long-standing love for the river, I realize it is related to my desire to fit in. There is something about getting into a moving stream of water and feeling that you have become a part of the river—you just flow with it. I cannot count the times I have just floated along lazily in the river, letting the current take me wherever it might. At a deep level this is very similar to the feelings we get when we feel like we are a part of a team. This feeling I have for water, and particularly for a moving stream, may not be one everyone can identify with, but the sensation is one I think we can all sense.

There is an inherent problem with all of these scenarios and our effort to fit in or be a part of something. We were created to be one with God! God's ultimate goal for us is that we are one with Him. This is so important to God that He sent His Son Jesus to die on a cross that we might be one with Him. John 17 records Jesus praying for His disciples, and then He prays for you and me:

²⁰I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²²The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, ²³I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me. (John 17:20-23)

The reason we are here is to be in relationship with God. Everything that works toward that end is of God.

¹⁶ For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

³ The LORD appeared to him from far away. I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you. (Jeremiah 31:3)

¹¹ For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. (Jeremiah 29:11)

²⁰ I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Galatians 2:20)

²⁰ In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. (John 14:20)

⁴⁰ For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. (John 6:40)

⁶ Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6)

Our needs are met in Christ Jesus. God's name is Jehovah-jireh, “the LORD will provide” (Genesis 22:14), and God is and has been providing for us always and beyond. When His people needed a leader, God provided Moses; when they needed water, He gave it from a rock; when food was needed, God sent it from heaven—and He even had birds deliver food to Elijah; when we needed a savior from our sins, God sent His one and only Son to die in our place.

¹⁹ And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:19)

We can't look at this promise without seeing the requirements for God to provide: “But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you” (Matthew 6:33).

No person, no group, no club can make the promises God makes and carry them out. God knows what you need before you ask—He knows without you even asking—and it is His great pleasure to meet all of our needs, which He does through the blessed Savior, Jesus.

¹⁰ And you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power. (Colossians 2:10, NKJV)

No person can complete me (or any of us); neither can any group or club or relationship or substance or thing. We are only complete and whole in Christ Jesus.

²⁸ For in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, "For we are also His offspring." (Acts 17:28, NKJV)

There is another problem with trying to have our needs met in or through any other person or entity: people and groups and things are not always available; things change and people move away, change, and die. God is eternal, He never changes, and He has promised us: "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5, NKJV).

Finally, the reason we fit in perfectly with God and not with any other person, group, or club is: "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen" (Romans 11:36).

³¹ So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. (1 Corinthians 10:31)

²⁴ You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory. ²⁵ Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. ²⁶ My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. ²⁷ For behold, those who are far from you shall perish; you put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you. ²⁸ But for me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord God my refuge, that I may tell of all your works. (Psalm 73:24-28)

We were created for the specific purpose of being in a love relationship with God, where we love and honor and enjoy Him forever. No one else or nothing else will do.

THE ONLY ONE WE NEED TO FIT IN WITH IS
GOD HIMSELF. AND HE HAS PROVIDED THE
WAY—THROUGH THE WAY, JESUS CHRIST.

CHAPTER 66

SAFELY ACROSS THE RIVER

"Therefore I urge you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies [dedicating all of yourselves, set apart] as a living sacrifice, holy and well-pleasing to God, which is your rational (logical, intelligent) act of worship. And do not be conformed to this world [any longer with its superficial values and customs], but be transformed and progressively changed [as you mature spiritually] by the renewing of your mind [focusing on godly values and ethical attitudes], so that you may prove [for yourselves] what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect [in His plan and purpose for you]."

—Romans 12:1-2, (AMP)

MY EYES OPEN—THE CLOCK SAYS 3:09 a.m.; it's my favorite part of the day—and I can't wait to get started! "I sing praises to Your name, O Lord, praises to Your name, O Lord, for Your name is great and greatly to be praised."⁷² The early-morning, haven't-gotten-out-of-bed-yet praise, thanksgiving, and prayer is just heavenly to me—I awake looking forward to meeting God and seeing what He is going to do today.

Psalm 81 glows brightly from the screen of my phone, and I begin a new day of listening to what God has to say—"Sing aloud to God our strength; shout for joy to the God of Jacob!" (verse 1)—and taking Him at His Word. I do just that: I shout out to the Lord. God is speaking to me, and I am finally listening. He goes on to say to me, "Open your

72 Terry MacAlmon, "I Sing Praises," 1989.

mouth wide, and I will fill it" (verse 10), and like a little bird in the nest, I lie in my bed in the wee hours of the morning with my mouth gaped wide open, praying in my heart for God to fill it, to fill me.

I glimpse a note from a friend on my mirror that boldly proclaims, "On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand," as I head to my computer where I am fed: Peter Pan and saltines with a heavy dose of Psalms, Proverbs, and Romans—it is an appetizing breakfast to be sure. I pray my morning prayer to the Lord, which is also going on my Facebook page, where I pray others will prayerfully meditate on who God is, what He has done, and what He is doing.

Dogwood and wild azalea blossoms are beautiful in the early-morning light as I walk the trail alongside Black Creek. It is March 21, 2017, the second day of spring, and the views of the river and its banks and the sandbars and the reflection of the trees in the water all declare their Maker's praise. By God's grace I have made it safely "across the river," yet I know now that God was always on both banks of the river. It was never God who moved but me; He was always on both banks, but there is a key to seeing Him and experiencing His presence and provision.⁷³ I am, by His sovereign grace, "neither preaching nor drinking" but submitted to God.

God has always been and shall ever be God, but He is not God in my life until I submit to Him. I can be born again but not walking in full faith and submitting to God; that rebellion has to be broken. I have to listen to God and submit myself unto Him—to cry out to Him, to turn away from anything in my life that is between me and God—and fully rest in Him.

Because I have been living with myself for sixty-three years and because I have, by God's grace, forced myself to take a fearless and thorough look deep within and have seen what is there, I know that I am capable of losing my focus. I am often reminded of this wonderful old hymn:

⁷³ This refers to persons who are already born again in Christ Jesus. If you do not know Jesus as Lord and Savior, then I encourage you to read the message in Waypoint #1 and pray and ask God to guide you safely home to Him.

Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing⁷⁴

*Come, Thou Fount of every blessing,
Tune my heart to sing Thy grace;
Streams of mercy, never ceasing,
Call for songs of loudest praise.
Teach me some melodious sonnet,
Sung by flaming tongues above.
Praise the mount! I'm fixed upon it,
Mount of Thy redeeming love.*

*Jesus sought me when a stranger,
Wandering from the fold of God;
He, to rescue me from danger,
Interposed His precious blood;
How His kindness yet pursues me
Mortal tongue can never tell,
Clothed in flesh, till death shall loose me
I cannot proclaim it well.*

*O to grace how great a debtor
Daily I'm constrained to be!
Let Thy goodness, like a fetter,
Bind my wandering heart to Thee.
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
Prone to leave the God I love;
Here's my heart, O take and seal it,
Seal it for Thy courts above.*

I don't know the why of my reluctance to submit, but I can see clearly that this has been a major issue all of my life. I was fine with authority until either I didn't fit in or I felt like it was devised to keep me from doing what I wanted to do, and then I "kick[ed] against the goads" (Acts 26:14). A goad is a sharp, pointed stick the owner of an ox might use to touch an ox on the back of his legs and "goad him on." When the goads came out, so did my resistance. The long road to the lesson of learning the goads are there not to deny me but to protect me has been challenging: this started in the barbershop in Bude with the

74 Robert Robinson, "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing," 1758.

back room I was not to go in and has continued through jeeps, guns, lake houses, and laws against driving and drinking, to name just a few. The big submission issue was serving God in the places and ways He put me here to occupy—serving Him, not me! God is working all of the events of my life together for good for His ultimate glory—my part is to trust Him and obey. There is no other way to be happy in Jesus but to trust and obey.

THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME,
THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME,
THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME,
MY "HOME" IS IN JESUS CHRIST!

CONCLUSION

UNDERSTANDING AUTHORITY AND SAYING “YES” TO GOD!

⁵ TRUST IN AND RELY confidently on the LORD with all your heart and do not rely on your own insight or understanding.⁶ In all your ways know and acknowledge and recognize Him, and He will make your paths straight and smooth [removing obstacles that block your way]. (Proverbs 3:5-6, AMP)

¹⁶ For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. (Colossians 1:16)

The greatest blessing in my life has been coming to know, understand, and submit myself fully to the lordship of Jesus Christ as Lord, Savior, and my absolute Master. My greatest desire today is to have no will apart from the will of God, to be so identified with Jesus that without hesitation I follow His lead in thought, word, and deed. Down at the feet of Jesus is truly the most high place.

There have been many days in my life that I did not honor God, but even those days are being used by God to accomplish His overall greater purpose and His ultimate plan for my life. In a sense this may not make sense, but the things of God are always different from the things and ways of this world—but always true and infinitely better! I/We can and must trust God. He has perfect and true vision, and He always, always, always leads us in the very best direction—to Himself!

Today I experience some of my greatest challenges. I find myself confronted by some of the same issues I created when I failed to understand and recognize authority. I have to live with all of the wrong

seeds I have sown, but I also have the great joy of sowing right seeds in the midst of those challenges. I know assuredly that God is with me and He is working all things out for my good and His glory.

I pray that this writing has and will continue to help you in your life and especially in your relationship to God. Where we are in Christ Jesus is not an important part of life; it is our life—first, that we are born again as laid out in Waypoint #1; and, second, that we then live the rest of our lives fully committed to Jesus. Anything less than full commitment and obedience is rejection, and that is not where you want to be and it is not where God wants us to be. Jesus said it so well and so straightforwardly in these two simple but very pointed passages:

³⁶ “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” ³⁷ And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. ³⁸ This is the great and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. ⁴⁰ On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.” (Matthew 22:36-40)

³³ But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. (Matthew 6:33)

All that we need in life is found in the person of Jesus Christ. All the answers to all of life’s questions as well as the joy and peace our hearts so desperately seek after is found in the person of Jesus Christ. That is why Paul, the writer of the majority of the New Testament, said:

¹ Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you. ² Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. ³ For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh— ⁴ though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. ⁷ But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith

Understanding Authority and Saying “Yes” to God!

in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—¹⁰ that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,¹¹ that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.¹² Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.¹³ Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead,¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.¹⁵ Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you.¹⁶ Only let us hold true to what we have attained. (Philippians 3:1-16)

This is a picture of how we should spend the rest of our lives, following hard after the things of God. When I first got sober and started attending AA meetings (in the fall of 2008), I realized that the difference between the ones who stayed sober and the ones who went back out was one simple thing: the ones who stayed sober were all in.

A few months back while walking along the path on the Biloxi-Ocean Springs Bridge, I saw a young man riding a motorcycle at an extreme rate of speed with his front wheel in the air. My thought was not about the motorcycle but about the way this young man, for whatever foolish reason, was fully committed to that course at that moment. I thought then and I still think now: that is the way I want to live the rest of my days for Christ Jesus—all in!

God bless you as you live all in for Jesus. Amen.

ADDENDUM

ONE OF THE REASONS GOD left me here in spite of my lifelong efforts at an early exit is to be a witness and a help to others. If I can help you or someone you love or someone you know, then please let me know and I will do my best to help in any way God enables me to be of help. My e-mail is hollis@hollismcgehee.com.

