

Results, Not Excuses

For some time now, the members of our church that work at Intel have been praying against my office computer with a Cyrix CPU. Their prayers were answered last week. It gasped, and returned multiple registry errors as I rushed it to the local computer emergency room.

The repairman at the computer shop said, "No problem, we can have it ready for you first thing Monday morning." I left my critically ill computer in the hands of the kind repairman and boarded a plane to California.

After my workout Monday morning, I called to make sure the computer was ready. I didn't want to waste a trip if it wasn't. The shop, paged me with the bad news that Tony, my repairman, wasn't in yet. They assured me they'd call as soon as he arrived.

When I arrived at the office, the shop called again. This time they said they had no record of me dropping off a computer and could not find it anywhere.

This time I called. "Yes, Mr. Wilson," they said in the patronizing voice repairman use, "We've found your computer, and we're trying to locate Tony. We'll call you as soon as we know something."

I called again at noon and asked to speak to the manager. "Tony is not coming in today," he said, "I hate to put someone else on the job without knowing what he's already done, but I'll call you back before closing today to let you know the status."

He didn't call.

This morning I drove by the shop to speak face-to-face with the manager and the owner. "We burned-in a new CPU all night and it is still returning errors." He reassured me by telling me the shop down the street would send me home with my computer in that condition. But he wouldn't. Of course he told me, "We'll call you as soon as we know something."

In a period of 24 hours, I've heard 5 different answers to the same question and still don't have my computer. What would it be like to live in a world where people kept their promises and delivered results instead of excuses?

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Alone

I love the solitude of a Trout stream or a good book. Every now and then, when life gets hectic, I'll say, "I just wish everyone will leave me alone."

A few years ago I got my wish. I was isolated from everyone after drinking radioactive iodine as a treatment for papillary cancer. I wasn't allowed any visitors, not even the doctor. He stood behind a lead screen at the door to talk to me. The first few hours were wonderful, but after that, I needed human contact. Though periods of solitude are a welcome respite from "busyness," the truth is, I hate being alone.

It's not just me either. Something happens to people when they are isolated.

Every now and then, a television reporter will put a microphone into the face of a serial killer's neighbor and ask for a description of the criminal. Inevitably, the same term will surface. "He was a 'loner,'" they'll say, "He kinda kept to himself."

The FBI portrayed Eric Rudolph, the suspected bomber of Centennial Olympic Park during the 1996 Olympic Games, as a "loner." You'll remember that reporters used the same term to describe the convicted Unabomber, Ted Kaczynski, when he was arrested near Lincoln, Montana in May of 1996.

God said, "It is not good that man should be alone," (Gen. 2:18) immediately before He created Eve as a wife for Adam. When Jesus sent his disciples on a mission trip, He sent them out in pairs.

Yet, many Christians find themselves in spiritual isolation. They minister alone, study alone and live their Christian life alone. Though times of solitude are helpful to everyone, there is something unhealthy about being a "Lone Ranger" Christian.

After all, even the Lone Ranger had Tonto.

Are You in the Picture?

My wife and I have a bad habit. We load film in a camera, take the pictures, and put the roll of film in a dresser drawer where it is immediately forgotten. Recently, Susan's been taking a few rolls a week to get them developed. We never know what we're going to see when we open the package. It's the closest we get to playing the lottery.

The pictures range from snapshots of church functions to pictures of our children when they were tiny. They do have one thing in common--Susan isn't in the picture. Why? She's the official family photographer.

While thumbing through the pictures, I remembered a story Pastor Dan Rhodes told me last year. Dan is the pastor of two rural churches in Colorado and stays busy. Like most pastors, he has plenty to do, but by being the pastor of two churches, he has twice the committee meetings, and twice the worship services.

As Dan tells the story, his daughter's third grade teacher requested a parent teacher conference with him. His wife usually took care of those conferences, but the teacher wanted to see him, not his wife.

At her insistence, he made an appointment to drop by the school one afternoon. "I wanted you to see this drawing your daughter made of your family.," she said.

Dan looked at the drawing and asked, "Where am I?"

"That's why I called you down here today. I asked your daughter the same question and she said you're never home so she left you out of the picture."

A Mike Tyson punch couldn't hurt any more than her words. Dan made some radical changes in his behavior. He found that he could do his job and be a good father.

Are you in the picture with your family? Or are you too busy?

I Don't Understand

Some passages of scripture are easy to understand. Everyone knows what "Thou shall not commit adultery" means, right? Well, almost everyone.

But other passages make me scratch my head and ask, "What did God mean by that?" Though I can explain all the major interpretations of the book of Revelation, in my more honest moments, I just agree with John Calvin and say, "I don't understand it."

There's another classification of scripture that is even more troubling. My father calls them, the "I wish He hadn't said that" passages. You know, the kind of scriptures that are easy to interpret, but hard to accept.

Acts 5:1-11 is that kind of passage. It is preceded by the account of Barnabas giving a generous donation to the church in Acts 4:36-37. Ananias and Sapphira decided to follow his example and give the partial proceeds from a real estate transaction, but they acted as if they were giving the whole amount.

Instead of being grateful for the donation, God struck both of them dead. They lied, then they died.

And then there is the time God struck Uzzah because he tried to steady the Ark of the Covenant. (1 Chronicles 13:10). Uzzah simply touched the ark with his hand and dropped to the ground, dead.

Wouldn't it be easier to live under the delusion that God doesn't demand complete honesty and obedience from His people? We could just bask in His love and forget about His righteousness. But then again, if He isn't righteous, how can we believe what He says about loving us?

Every now and then, God stands up in the church and says, "I'm in charge here." He did it with Uzzah, and He did it with Ananias and Sapphira. And when He did, a great fear and awe fell among the people.

Perhaps we should obey the scriptures that are easy to understand, study the ones that are hard to understand, and be grateful for the ones that "we wish He hadn't said." If we do, we can replace the man-sized God of popular theology with one that is worthy of our devotion, praise, and worship.

Prejudice

"Don't put that nickel in your mouth. Some n*gg*r may have touched it."

Not exactly what you'd expect to hear from a teacher, but it is my earliest remembrance of Sunday School. Throughout the years, I've learned that most people struggle with racism--even Christians.

I know I do.

Don't get me wrong. I don't consider myself a bigot, but there are times I prejudge people..

I came face to face with my own prejudice when my wife, Susan and I drove through Los Angeles after spending four days on a cruise ship. It was right after the Rodney King riots of 1992. The bustling "City of Angels" looked like a ghost town. People locked their doors and stayed at home. No one was on the freeways.

I was very conscious of the color of people's skin as I drove through town. I couldn't wait to get home to "my people."

I was scared.

Even good Christian men and women struggle with prejudice. Simon Peter did. But after God dealt with him, he said: "I see very clearly that God doesn't show partiality. In every nation He accepts those who fear Him and do what is right. (Acts 10:34-35 NLT)."

When Peter became aware of his prejudice and applied the gospel to it, he made the necessary adjustments in his thinking. It all began, though, with addressing the hidden prejudices in his heart.

Back to the nickel . . . the teacher was right, I shouldn't have put that nickel in my mouth. Nickels have germs from riding around in people's pockets. But she was wrong to let that kind of language come out of hers. Jesus said: "But those things which proceed out of the mouth come forth from the heart; and they defile the man." (Matthew 15:18 KJV)."

Love

In his book, *The Power of Loving Your Church*, David Hansen shows his readers Christ's love in action in the church. One story especially touched me.

While ministering in rural Montana, David met a feisty 94-year old blind woman whose fierce independence buffeted his early attempts to minister to her. She chopped her own wood, cooked her own meals and wouldn't accept help from anyone, much less the preacher. She would, however, allow him to drop by to give her the Lord's Supper.

For the longest time, he couldn't convince her that people loved her. "Love isn't in the Bible," she said, "The Bible calls it charity, not love." He continued faithfully ministering to her on her terms.

With time, she began to allow the church to bring meals by and even let the Pastor chop some wood for her. Her cold exterior began to thaw. The church started helping her with her bills and assisted her niece in cleaning up around the place. Pastor David began chopping wood for her on a regular basis – it was his way of showing Christ's love for one of His children.

Before her one hundredth birthday, she went into a local nursing home where she receives the care she needs. Though Pastor David didn't need to chop wood for her anymore, he continued to minister to her. In his book, he describes what happened after stopping by the nursing home to give her communion one day.

"Upon rising to leave, I stoop over and give her a hug. She reaches up and returns my embrace." Before leaving, he tells her "I have charity for you, Kathryn," And she responds, "Well, that's nice, a person needs a lot of that." (Hansen, 169-170).

Christ's love, excuse me, charity, can melt the hardest heart and heal the deepest hurts. Kathryn was right, a person needs a lot of it.

Inner Circle

I've never been comfortable with John's self designation as the "Disciple whom Jesus loved." As a child, my Sunday School teachers told me John was a humble man and used that designation to avoid using his name. They thought it was his way to avoid "name dropping." I didn't buy it. Oh, I knew better than to argue with them, but I didn't buy it. Although it isn't exactly what he said, to a child, the phrase smacked of "He loved me more than you."

Was John saying that Jesus loved him more than the others? Remember, it was his mother who asked Jesus if her boys could have a place of honor in the Kingdom (Matt. 20:20). Do you think John was being competitive?

Not me.

As a part of the "inner circle" John had a special relationship with Jesus. But I don't think that explains the designation either. Then what does?

He was there.

The hymn writer described it like this, "Oh the love that drew salvation's plan! Oh, the grace that brought it down to man! Oh, the mighty gulf that God did span at Calvary."

John was the only disciple at Calvary. If hearing about the cross inspired the poet to relish Jesus' love, wouldn't being there make an even greater impact?

Could it be that Jesus' love so defined his life that no other words were needed to describe who He was?

Wordless Prayers

I don't know if it is the "deer in the headlights look," the nervous twitch, or the way they shift their weight and shuffle their feet, but I can usually tell when my children are lying to me. Speech communication theorists call it "lack of congruency in the nonverbal cues and the verbal message." The song writer said, "You can't hide your lying eyes." Same difference. Growing up on the plains of West Texas we used to say, "Something stinks in Denmark." (I have no idea what that means, but I've said it a time or two.)

Whenever someone says one thing, but does another, we are more likely to believe what they do. A man who beats his wife will never convince me that he loves her. His actions betray his real heart.

What do our actions say to God that we would never express in our prayers? Do they betray our hearts? We would never pray, "God you know that you're really not that important to me, I only need you when I'm in trouble." But what do our actions pray? No, that's not a typo, I didn't mean "What do our actions say," I meant, "What do our actions pray?" Some of the most powerful prayers we pray are with our actions, not our words.

What wordless prayers are you praying, when the light turns green and the person in front of you is slow pulling out? Or when the offering plate passes in front of you, or when your daughter says, "Mommy, can you read to me?"

God knows my heart. He knows when I'm fudging, fibbing and outright lying. He also knows when I'm doing my best to depend on Him and make a difference in the world.

God knows your heart too.

What wordless prayers will you pray today?

Attitude Adjustment

“Here you go, son. Here’s the fries you wanted.” The father handed his son a super sized container of French fries and a coke. He sat across the table from his son to sip his coffee and read his newspaper.

His son was becoming quite the young man. It seemed like just yesterday that they brought him home from the hospital wrapped in a baby blanket his grandmother knitted. Now he was taller than his mother and showing traces of peach fuzz on his chin.

Turning to the Sport’s section, the smell of the fresh French fries distracted the father. He reached across the table to take a couple. “No Dad,” the boy snapped, “these are my fries. You can’t have any.”

“How dare he?!” The father thought. “This boy needs an attitude adjustment. Doesn’t he know where these fries came from? Why, if it wasn’t for me, he wouldn’t have any fries at all. For that matter, he wouldn’t have a roof over his head, clothes on his back or anything to eat.”

Disgusted, the father’s thoughts careened out of control. “You know what I should do? I should go back to the counter and order 20 packs of fries and eat every one of them in front of you.” “If I wanted to,” the father reasoned, “I could take his fries away and throw them in the trash, and I’d be justified in doing so. After all, his attitude stinks and I am his father.”

As the mental storm subsided, the father identified the source of his irritation. The issue wasn’t whether he got a French fry or not. If he really wanted some fries, he could get his own. He didn’t need his son’s potatoes. What bothered him was the ungrateful attitude his son demonstrated by not willingly sharing with him.

I wonder if God ever feels that way?

I Don't Understand

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” (John 3:16 KJV)

“How many other people do this too?” The clerk looked up at me puzzled by my question. “How many people buy a candy bar to eat with their diet drink?”

She laughed, “More than you'd think.”

During a particularly busy day, I'd stopped by the gift shop of the hospital to grab some “lunch,” a diet Dr. Pepper and a Snickers bar. Why? I've never understood why I bother with the diet drink if I'm going to eat a candy bar. Oh well! I rationalized my behavior, made the hospital visit, and drove back to the office.

Speaking of driving, something else puzzles me. Why do I circle the parking lot at the health club to find a parking space close to the front door? After all, I'm about to spend 30 minutes sweating on the treadmill. Why not do my warm-up by walking from the parking lot to the dressing room?

This morning, after parking in a prime parking space, I began my morning workout with John MacArthur tuned into my radio headset. Somewhere during his sermon my mind began wondering about the mysteries of life. No, I wasn't thinking about my eating or driving habits. I was focused on the greatest mystery of all. Why would God become man, suffer the inhumane treatment of his peers, and die on the cross for my sins?

Was it to teach us something? Did He do it to prove something? What did He get out of it?

The people around me must have thought it odd as I began humming an old, familiar tune. “Oh, the love that drew salvation's plan. Oh, the grace that bro't it down to man! Oh, the mighty gulf that God did span. At Calvary.”

It was L-O-V-E! He did it because He loves us.

On the way to work, I stopped by the store to grab breakfast, a green chili sausage burrito, with plenty of eggs, potatoes and cheese, and a soda to wash it down. A diet of course!

Littleton

Out of respect for the dead, Marilyn Manson canceled his (its?) singing (screaming?) engagements for the rest of the year. The National Rifle Association shortened its convention in Denver and a television network pulled a show from its lineup that had a school shooting in Denver as the story line.

Why? Two boys took up arms and maliciously, in cold blood, killed 12 innocent children and one courageous teacher. I can't even begin to imagine the pain suffered by those families. This Mother's Day, my heart goes out to the people of Littleton, Colorado.

What's the answer? Gun control? More laws and regulations? Censorship of violent video games, rock music and movies? Metal detectors in the schools? Armed policeman patrolling the hallways? Corporal punishment? Putting prayer back in the schools?

Talking heads and pundits are filling the airwaves with their opinions about the cause and the cure of this madness. Out of respect for the dead, I'll not use this tragedy as an opportunity to footnote to my opinions. Instead, I'll just weep with those who weep.

"God, help those who weep today, give them strength to face tomorrow and the courage to make their world a better place. Comfort, comfort your people."

One more thing I'll do. I'll pause to count my blessings.

"Thank you Lord, for the health to serve you. If it wasn't for your miraculous touch on my body, I know I would not be able. I thank you for two precious boys who are the joy of my heart and a godly wife who faithfully serves beside me. I thank you for her gentle spirit and spiritual radiance. I thank you for a father who serves as an example to me of what it means to be a loving pastor, faithful husband, and caring dad. And of course, I thank you for my mother, who is the godliest person I know. Thank you for the blessings you bring into my life and I pray that I will be a blessing to others."

May God bless the mothers of Littleton . . . and the rest of the world.

My Parents

When I was ten, my parents could do no wrong. By the time I was thirteen, they could do no right. Both perspectives were clouded and inaccurate. Like a pendulum swinging, the teenage perspective corrected the naive childish view. Today I'm able to evaluate my upbringing with greater clarity.

My parents? They were the greatest. Really., I grew up in a Norman Rockwell painting. I was lucky. Yeah, a couple of times they punished me unjustly, but that seems pretty insignificant now when weighed against the number of times I didn't get punished because I didn't get caught.

The thing I admire most about my parents is the way they taught their values to their children. I can't remember too many times that we studied the Bible together or had a structured time of teaching, but they taught us with their actions.

When they attended our recitals or ball games, they taught us that we were important to them. When they did their jobs with excellence, and required the same of us, they taught us the value of work.

Every week, Momma gave us an allowance and let us spend it any way we wanted. By giving us freedom, they taught us responsibility and the value of a dollar.

By taking us to church every Sunday, they taught us the value of worship. And by accepting us, even when we made bad choices, they taught us the meaning of unconditional love.

Yeah, there was a time I would have traded my parents for another set. Today, I pray, that my children's parents are as good to them as mine were, and are, to me.

Childlike Faith

For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. Romans 1:16

Growing up in a preacher's home had some advantages and disadvantages. Like most PK's (Preacher's Kid), I wanted to be a "regular guy," with my own identity. I hated the fact that the adults in the church thought they could tell me how to act or behave just because my Dad was the preacher.

But, being a PK had its advantages too.

Many Sundays, someone from the church would have us over for a Southern fried chicken dinner or homemade ice cream. When I reached "working age," some of Dad's members would hire me to mow their lawn or chop their weeds.

As I look back on it now, the greatest advantage was getting to know some great men of God. Traveling evangelists, denominational workers, and other pastors all seemed to find their way to our home to put their feet underneath my Momma's table.

The exposure wasn't limited to our home. Because I was a PK, I went with Dad to conferences and conventions. One event stands out in my mind. We drove to Cotton Center, Texas, to attend a witness training seminar. Though only eight years old at the time, I listened as the seminar leader taught that witnessing was the responsibility of every Christian and as he showed us how to share our faith.

I was too young then to know that some Christians are willing to teach about evangelism and others are willing to study about evangelism, but the church REALLY doesn't expect Christians to witness. I took the training seriously and began to share my faith on the playground, at church, and in our neighborhood. I discovered it worked. Children came to Christ, not because I was a skilled witness, but because the gospel is powerful.

I can't remember the names of those children, but God can, and He will spend eternity with them. There is one name I remember. Lori! A few years ago, I stood at her grave side and prayed. "Lord, thank you for the power of the gospel that saved my little sister when we were just children. Take good care of her, Amen."

In that moment, I was grateful for childlike faith. The faith I had to share, and the faith she had to believe.

Fickle

What was the mood in the upper room at the Last Supper? When I close my eyes and try to imagine the evening, all I can see is da Vinci's painting. (Why did they all sit on the same side of the table?)

My art critique aside, I imagine it was a very serious evening. Jesus dramatically showed His heart as He knelt down to wash the disciples' feet. An amazing demonstration of servant-leadership.

After supper, the scripture says they sang a hymn and went out into the evening. But then what? What did they do after spending spiritual, intimate time with Jesus?

On the Mount of Olives, Jesus entered into the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. He made a simple request of his friends: "Pray for me." Instead, they went to sleep.

Everyone, that is, except Judas. He went to town and rounded up some of his friends. When he saw Jesus, he gave Him a kiss.

In the upper room, with the others he said, "Surely not I, Lord?" I won't betray you." But Judas did betray Jesus. His betrayal was especially bitter because he did it with a kiss – a sign of intimate friendship.

Simon Peter pledged he would die for Jesus before he denied Him. But then a little servant girl made an innocent comment to Peter, "You were with Him." Instead of admitting his association with Jesus, Peter denied that he knew Him—not once, but three times.

What impact did the Last Supper have on the participants? The disciples went to sleep instead of praying for Him. Judas betrayed Jesus, and Peter denied that he even knew Jesus.

Fellowship with Jesus does not guarantee loyalty to Him. It takes more than that.

"Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me." (Matthew 16:24 KJV).

Routines

Today as I arrived in the office, to my utter delight, I was greeted by four tickets to the Colorado Rockies/ St. Louis Cardinals game on July 23rd. My Uncle Bobby, who pastors the Praise Assembly of God in Pueblo, Colorado, mailed them to me as a gift. Life doesn't get much better than this! Just last week I was telling a friend that I wanted to go to a Rockies/ Cardinals game during our next vacation. He told me that he already tried to get tickets, but couldn't because the games are sold out. Now I've got mine and I can't wait to use them!

I love baseball.

I like to watch batting practice and the field crew manicuring the infield. I like hearing the vendors selling their wares, "Hot Dogs, get your Hot Dogs heeeeeeere!" I love the national anthem at the beginning of the game and singing "Take me out to the Ball game" in the bottom of the seventh inning. I even love watching the stands empty after a game.

Then there is the game itself. Baseball is the working man's version of poetry. Everything is balanced. Nine players, nine innings. Three strikes, three outs. Four balls, four bases.

I understand that some of you don't like the game. You say it is too slow and even go so far as to call it boring. Don't you see, that's the beauty of the game. Baseball, like life, is filled with the routine, interrupted occasionally by the spectacular.

Though I love baseball, I can't stand to watch baseball highlights on the news. There is no mystery to it. Every batter hits a home run and every fielder makes an unbelievable catch. When the spectacular becomes the common place it loses its appeal to me. Only in the context of routine plays and easy fly balls does the long ball over the fence grab my attention.

Most of my tomorrows are like most of my yesterdays. Hum drum, routine grounders. But every now and then, something out of the ordinary happens (like receiving a thoughtful gift from an uncle) that makes my soul sing.

110%

My teammates cheered.

Coach didn't say a word and neither did I.

I usually enjoyed "Film Day," on Monday afternoons. Long before Camcorders and VHS tapes, our coach would have every game filmed on 16 mm, have it developed overnight and ready for Monday's practice.

Dressed only in football pants and our foul smelling T-shirts, we listened to Coach McCord's analysis of the previous game, his voice barely audible over the rat-a-tat-tat of the projector.

He rarely pointed out good plays, but was quick to find fault. One afternoon, he drilled me. The quarterback called my least favorite play--I was supposed to pull from my right tackle position and trap the linebacker on the left side of the line. I was too slow for that play. Coach knew I was too slow for that play, my feet just couldn't move fast enough to get my body over there. Why did he insist on calling a play he knew I couldn't do?

In the film room, Coach backed the play up five or six times, "Wilson, you've got to get the lead out of your pants. If you're going to remain as our strong side, tackle, you're going to have to make these plays." He really let me have it! Finally, he stopped toggling the reverse button and let the play finish. Though it looked like I wouldn't make the block, at the last millisecond, I left my feet, dove in front of the running back and took the linebacker out of the play. Our fullback ran through the hole and made a substantial gain.

I would have liked for the Coach to say "Good play, Wilson," but he didn't. He and I were silent as everyone else cheered.

I wasn't a good football player. The truth is, I was lucky to be on the team. I had size and strength, but was too slow to be effective. Coach was right in assuming I wouldn't make that block, normally I didn't. But this time I did. Not because of ability, but because of heart and determination. As Coach used to say, "Wilson, you've got to give it 110% if you're going to be a starter on my team."

He was right then, and is right now. Thanks Coach. That was a good life lesson.

Quality Time

Wearing a fresh shine on his shoes, a suit his wife gave him on graduation day, and a determined look on his face, Brian stood outside his new office. It wasn't the corner office, but it looked pretty good to him. The smell of new leather from his chair and the warm glow of sunshine streaming through the window greeted him as he positioned his alligator briefcase on the corner of his mahogany desk.

Click, click. Brian opened his briefcase and took out three items -- a hammer, a nail and his college degree. "Hello, Brian." Mr. Pensky, Brian's new boss, said as he extended his right hand, "Welcome to Acme Widget, Inc."

Still holding the hammer, Brian reached out to shake his employer's hand. "Excuse me, sir," Brian said, noticing his mistake. He set the hammer on his desk, shook Mr. Pensky's hand and said, "It's good to be here sir."

Mr. Pensky smiled, and turned to leave. As he was walking out of the room he said, "We have a staff meeting at 10:00 this morning in the conference room. I'll introduce you to everybody then."

"I'm sorry, sir, but that won't work for me."

Mr. Pensky spun, reentered the room and stood motionless in his gray flannel suit. "What do you mean that won't work for you?"

"Well," Brian explained, "I'm planning on leaving the office around 9:30 this morning to go fishing with some friends. You know what they say, 'it isn't the quantity, but the quality of time that matters.' I won't be spending much time in the office while I'm working for you, but I assure you the time I spend will be high quality."

It takes more than "Quality time" to keep a job, and it takes more than "Quality time" to raise a family. It takes real time -- the combination of quality and quantity.

The Truth

"The pathologist's report is in; it was positive."

"What? It was what . . . what does that mean?"

"Mr. Wilson, you have cancer."

It was a call I'd been expecting. I knew there was a chance that the lump was cancerous, but I wasn't fully prepared to hear the "C" word. I was too young and too healthy to be sick. For the next few moments I was numb.

I could have argued with him, waxed philosophical and claimed that cancer doesn't exist. But my denial wouldn't have changed the reality.

He told me the type of cancer I had, the cure rate and the proposed treatment. "Thank you, Doctor; I appreciate your call."

It was undoubtedly the worse news anybody ever told me. Why did I thank him?

The doctor wasn't happy I had cancer; I could tell by the tone of his voice. He was happy, however, that he had some good news, too. My type of cancer has a 90% cure rate. I thanked him for the bad news because it saved my life.

Preachers have good and bad news to tell. The bad news? Hell's fires are real and permanent. No sugar coating will change this reality. Without Christ, we are all doomed to spend eternity in hell.

We don't need to feel better about ourselves or "three easy steps to self-fulfillment," we need to hear the truth. The truth was, I had cancer and without proper treatment it would have killed me. I'm grateful to my doctor that he told me the truth!

The good news is that the Bible promises a 100% cure rate to those who believe. Jesus paid the price for sin and holds the keys to hell in His nail-scarred hand.

Today, after several surgeries and radiation treatments, I am cancer free. Although, "You have cancer," were not the words I was hoping to hear, they were words that eventually saved my life.

"Without Christ, you will spend eternity in Hell" are not words that people want to hear either, but they are the truth. And they could save their lives.

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In Charge

On March 30, 1981 John Hinckley, Jr. raised a .22 caliber pistol and shot President Reagan as the President left a Washington hotel. The secret service agents pushed the President into the car and rushed him to George Washington University Hospital. Reagan survived the attack and quickly recovered. A jury found Hinckley not guilty by reason of insanity for the attempted assassination.

Hinckley wasn't the only one whose mind slipped. Back at the White House, Alexander Haig announced, "I'm in charge, here, now!" But we all know he wasn't.

Alexander Haig is a man comfortable with being in charge. From 1974-79, he was the NATO Supreme Allied Commander in Europe. I would imagine he gave an order or two while in the military. When he retired from the US Army, he did so with the rank of General, which means most of the men and women in the Army had to salute him when he walked into the room.

Under President Nixon he was the Whitehouse Chief of Staff and under President Reagan he was the Secretary of State. He was a man under authority who had authority. But this time he was wrong. He wasn't in charge – someone else was.

Haig's mistake reminds us that not everyone who thinks they are in charge really are.

Satan may think he is in charge, but he isn't. The government may think they are in charge, but they aren't. The Supreme Court may think they are in charge, but they aren't. You may think you are in charge, but you aren't.

Then who is in charge, here, now?

"For the Lord is king! He rules all the nations. Let the rich of the earth feast and worship. Let all mortals—those born to die—bow down in his presence." (Psalm 22:28-29 NLT).

Depravity

“You can keep your depravity of man,” my ethics professor said., “I don’t buy it.” He abruptly ended the discussion that afternoon, but he didn’t change my mind. You see, I wasn’t just a theology student studying at a respected seminary. I was also the father of a two-year-old at the time. Enough said?

They come into the world kicking and screaming, and self absorbed. And we never once have to teach them to throw a fit. Why is that?

They constantly yell “mine,” when nothing really belongs to them. We never have to tell them NOT to share – they pick that up on their own.

When they’re not saying “mine,” they are yelling “NO!” Throwing baby food across the room I understand – I wouldn’t eat that stuff either! But they also fight hot baths and squirm away from warm hugs,. Nothing can explain that.

We spend months teaching them to go in the potty and years teaching them to read, and a lifetime teaching them to eat their veggies, but don’t have to spend a single second teaching them to disobey. Why is that?

The same reason you don’t have to teach a cat to meow or a dog to bark;; it is their nature.

My professor? A few years later, he was fired for a morals violation. I wonder if he believes in the depravity of man today?

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What's the Point?

When my favorite magazine, LEADERSHIP JOURNAL arrives on my desk every quarter, I usually stop whatever I'm doing and thumb through it. First, I read the cover to get a feel for the theme and see if any articles appeal to me. A split second later, I flip through the magazine from back to front to read the cartoons. When I finally make it to the front, I read the expanded table of contents and make a mental note of what I will read immediately and what I will read later.

The Spring '99 issue centered on worship. Following my normal routine, I found a cartoon that, as far as I'm concerned, summarized the modern culture of worship. A preacher was speaking to a prospect on the front lawn of the church and said, "Our church is so laid back that our early service doesn't start 'til noon." Now that's a new way to gauge the quality of worship!

In our consumer-driven society, Christians go "church shopping" hoping to find a church with just the right blend. Labels like Assembly of God, Baptist or Community aren't enough anymore. Their shopping list might include questions like. Is the church charismatic or not? Does the preacher wear a suit or a polo shirt on Sunday morning? Does the church sing long songs or short ones? Are the songs accompanied by an organ, a piano, or a computer-driven system? Do I read the words from a hymnal or off a screen? Is the pastor formal or cool? Do we sit on chairs or pews? And on the questions go.

Are we missing the point? A few years ago a young lady told me, "I go to your church because God goes there!" Now that's the point! God's at church. Worship Him.

Background Noise

In the distance, a siren sounds as an ambulance races against time. The base notes from the neighbor's stereo thunder through the wall and shake the knick knacks on the curio shelf. Your children slam the front door and run through the hall as the television is showing the first of fifteen consecutive commercial messages.

Have you considered how noisy life is?

Yesterday I was sitting at my travel agent's desk as she checked the lowest rates for a trip I'm planning to make. As she stared at the computer screen, I kept hearing an intermittent loud buzz. "What is that noise," I asked. "Oh that," she said, "that's the signal that someone just walked in the door. After a while you get used to it--I don't even hear it anymore."

Is it possible to hear something so often that you don't hear it anymore?

I was day dreaming with a friend the other day about getting out of our condo and buying a house near where I work. He said, "I'd never live down there; its too close to the train tracks, I wouldn't want to hear the trains all night."

"What trains?" I asked. "I never hear a train while I'm at work."

The next day I heard the train go by several times. I guess I'd become so accustomed to hearing it that I didn't even hear it anymore.

How can God get our attention when the volume of life is turned up so loud that we no longer hear anything? Whenever Jesus had an important decision to make, He left the crowd and got off to Himself and prayed. In solitude, He connected with His Father and found guidance to make the tough decisions.

Maybe the trick to hearing God is to go where you can't hear anything else.

How's your 'tude?

It's been pretty tough being a Dodger fan this season.

Even Tommy Lasorda is embarrassed. Last week, the Los Angeles Times reported that the senior Vice President borrowed a page from his coaching days and gave a rousing locker room speech to the team. Lasorda directed one comment toward a specific outfielder, saying he had a "bad attitude."

Attitude? What's that got to do with anything?

Isn't the success of a game defined by how well a team plays not what kind of an attitude they play with? Think about it for a minute.

Mom and Dad save for six months to take their children to an amusement park. The day finally comes and their older teenager resists going because she would rather be with her friends. She goes, but lags behind the family and refuses to ride any of those "kiddy rides."

A hard working family calculates their tithe to the exact penny, writes their check and places it in the offering plate. Does their attitude matter? After all, they followed the letter of the law.

A wife cooks a fine meal, but after she brings it from the kitchen she slams the plate in front of her husband and says, "Here it is!" And immediately retreats to the other room. Does it really matter how good the food tastes?

So, how's your 'tude? Do you have a good atti (tude) or a bad atti (tude)? Are other people uplifted or pulled down when they bump into you?

In gift giving, they say it is the thought that counts. In everything else, I'd say, it's the 'tude that counts.

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Let the Walls Come Down

On August 15, 1999, I felt a sense of history as I participated in worshiping our Lord with the members of New Hope Baptist Church in Lake Village, Arkansas.

In 1850, racial tension ripped apart Baptists at the Mason-Dixon line. Southern Baptists believed missionaries could own slaves, the Baptists in the north disagreed, so we split. Eight short years later, a slave, Jim Kelly, started the New Hope Baptist Church. To prepare for its 100th anniversary, the members of the church remodeled the auditorium in 1958. Nothing has been done since.

A mission team from our church in New Mexico went to Lake Village to tear down the church interior and put up a new one. The work was hot, dirty, and noisy at times, exactly what you'd expect. Tearing down walls is hard work.

As the worship service began, Rev. Haney asked, "Will you stand to welcome the choir as they enter the room." I stood. The back doors of the auditorium opened and the choir began singing a song and swayed into the building. We worshiped.

As the guest preacher approached the pulpit, I glanced at my watch. We'd already worshiped for almost an hour and a half. It seemed like minutes.

At the end, I stood to give the closing prayer. For a few minutes I looked at the congregation without saying a word. I then began thanking God for the service, the presence of His Spirit, and the privilege of worshiping and serving Him.

As I said Amen, the people just stood there. No one began to move. I didn't move either. I didn't want the moment to slip away. It was historic. Our church, made up of Anglos and Hispanics from New Mexico drove 1000 miles to hang 125 sheets of dry wall and worship with a Black congregation. As we left, I couldn't help but hear the sound of walls falling down.

"For He is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us." (Ephesians 2:14).

The Wonder of it All

Standing above the tree line, I looked down upon God's creation with a sense of awe and wonder. Beneath my feet was the mountain tundra in full bloom. The clouds overhead swirled and darted from place to place as the chilling wind dared to push me from my observation post.

While we were on vacation this past summer, my brother-in-law offered to drive me and my boys to the mountain peak in his jeep. As we neared the top, the road became progressively more narrow and less passable. At times, we bounced more than we rolled, but the travail of the journey disappeared when we reached the summit. It was breathtaking! Few places will paralyze my movement and stir my soul like the Colorado Rocky Mountains.

Last week I saw the mighty Mississippi River and the waves break against the shoreline of the Pacific Ocean. Two distinct bodies of water, but they have one thing in common; they both demand the viewer pause and stare at them.

Most days are ordinary get-up-and-go-to-work kind of days, but every now and then something happens that grabs our attention and demands we pause. Things like the view from the top of the Rocky Mountains or the Mississippi River or the Ocean.

Remember when the doctor handed you your newborn baby? Or when your father put your hand in the hand of your husband to be at the church altar? Those are not moments to rush through. They are worth marinating in.

Remember when God first called you to salvation? Or a time when you were on fire serving Him? As we grow in our Christian faith, it is easy to lose the wonder of God and live our life on autopilot. Perhaps it is time to pause, renew our sense of awe, and step out on faith to take on new challenges.

Various Trials

“My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations;” (James 1:2 KJV)

“Count it all joy,” the scripture says. I don’t know about you, but my first response to the trials I face is not to “count it all joy!”

I usually begin by asking, “Why me?” Then, with an attitude, I ask, “WHY ME?”

I don’t want to be too philosophical, but the question I should ask is, “Why not me?”

Why should everyone else face problems, trials, heartaches, tragedy, and outright crisis and me be excluded? Why should others lose their loved ones, but not me? Why should other people get cancer, and not me? Why should my neighbors be a crime statistic, but not me?

In retrospect, I know that I am a better person because I’ve faced hard times and suffered tragedy. Those trials became my teachers.

Loss taught me that God is my sustainer and that His people will comfort me when I ache.

Cancer taught me that God is my healer and that I can depend on Christian love to care for me when I hurt.

Facing an intruder at 3:00 in the morning taught me that God is my protector and that love is more important than things.

After the dust is settled from the pain, I’m left praising God for His providence, His church, and the family and friends He surrounds me with. In the trails I’ve experienced the grace I’ve studied and encountered the God I’ve read about.

Come to think about it, I’ve even learned to “Count it all joy . . .”

Just a Trace

I felt like I was caught in the plot line of a bad B grade movie and that at any moment someone would emerge, light a cigarette, point a light in my eyes and say, "Ve ave vays of making you talk."

Lucky me. I was selected at random for a high tech search of my laptop computer as I passed through the security check point at the Albuquerque Sunport. The guard took a paper towel and wiped the outside of my laptop and put the towel over a small pipe emitting air. A moment later, she showed a printout to her supervisor. I strained to hear their conversation. "Run it again," he said.

By now, a line was forming behind me. She repeated the routine. Wiping my laptop, putting the paper over the small pipe and taking to her supervisor. After the third time, the supervisor came over and asked to see my ticket.

People were staring at me. I began to feel self conscious and guilty. Guilty of what? I didn't know, but I felt the same way I did as a freshman in High School sitting outside the principal's office after I smarted off to a teacher.

"Is there a problem?" I asked.

"Your computer has set off three alarms, and we can't let you on the plane without the approval of the airlines."

"What do you mean alarms--what kind of alarms?"

Looking at the tape, the supervisor said, "The alarm is for plastic explosives." "Wait just a minute, the official from the airlines will be here soon."

I looked at my watch, I'd been in line now for 30 minutes, I could miss my flight. I considered my options. I could leave my laptop behind, but I needed the PowerPoint presentation for the seminar I was leading in California and I was planning on writing an article on the plane that was due in five days.

When the official arrived, I answered a dozen questions. Then she asked, "Has anyone else touched your computer?"

"Well I bought it used."

"How long ago?"

"Oh, last year."

"Who did you buy it from?"

"I don't remember his name, all I remember is he was an engineer at Sandia."

"Well that explains it," she said. "There is still a residue on the computer from when he handled it."

I couldn't believe my ears. They could detect what someone had on their hands who handled my computer over a year ago. Amazing. She let me proceed.

As I boarded the plane, I was relieved that everything worked out alright. I would meet my writing deadline, and be able to teach the seminar. But I couldn't help but think about the lingering effects of what we come in contact with. By now I wasn't thinking about plastic explosives anymore, I was thinking about the condition of my soul.

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What are the lingering effects of a lustful look, or a flash of anger? What happens to a Christian leader when they give in to laziness and decide to relax instead of serve the Lord? That's why King David cried out, "Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow." (Psalm 51:7 KJV).

Small Talk

“So, are you taking over Dan Coker’s church?”

It was the day after I accepted the call to become the next pastor of the First Southern Baptist Church of the Monterey Peninsula. My wife and I were getting information to enroll our youngest son in school when the clerk at the school asked me the question.

The question hit me wrong for a couple of reasons. I didn’t like the phrase, “taking over.” It made me feel like a corporate raider acquiring a business. I prefer the terminology churches use, “to accept the call.” A pastor doesn’t “take over,.” He accepts a call that is issued from God and from a church to become their pastor.

The second part of that question bothered me, too. It sounded like the pastor “owns” the church. This church never belonged to Dan Coker and it will never belong to me -- it is God’s church. People can start to believe they own the church. Maybe they’ve been members a long time, contributed large sums of money, or hold important offices in the church. Regardless, the church will always belong to God. Jesus Christ redeemed her with His precious blood. The church belongs to Him. Not to me, and not to you. The church belongs to Him.

For a brief moment I flirted with correcting the nice lady across the counter from us. I could tell her I wasn’t taking over anything and that the church would always belong to the Lord. Instead, I just replied “yes,” got the information we needed, and left.

She probably didn’t mean anything by the question. It was just small talk. But deep down inside it reminded me of something I can’t afford to ever forget.

Investments

Have you made any investments that have worked out for you lately? No, I'm not talking about the stock or bond market,. I'm interested in your personal investments -- your investments in people.

For the past year, I've collected news items for a lecture I give at a Seminary in a Pastoral Ministries class on weddings. It seems that society's views of weddings and marriages are changing. In France and in the United States there is a debate about whether homosexual couples can enter into "holy matrimony." When I lived in California, I was asked to perform a ceremony for two lesbians. Unbelievable, isn't it?

One of my favorite news stories came out of St. Paul, Minnesota. David Weinlick was tired of his friends asking him when he was going to tie the knot, so he set a date and asked them to choose his bride for him. Twenty-five women showed up for the "cattle call" and the committee chose Elizabeth Runze to be his "lawfully wedded wife."

Recently, a man in Sicily surprised the preacher, his bride to be, and everyone else with the answer "I don't" to the question, "Will you have this woman . . ." The night before, he discovered her in the embrace of a member of the wedding party. He wasn't about to enter into a relationship of fidelity with a women who was cheating on him. Though he didn't want to get married, he didn't want to ruin the wedding, so he invited all the guests to continue with the reception and have a good time.

In New York this past spring, Louis Delig stabbed his new wife to death during the post-wedding party because he suspected her of cheating with a friend. Apparently, he misunderstood the meaning of the words "til death do we part."

Meaningful relationships give life substance. Whether it is marriage or friendship, we all need relationships. How's your people portfolio?

Good Sport

In an era when a cross-dressing basketball player kicks a spectator and a convicted rapist bites the ear off a boxing opponent, it is refreshing to watch professional athletes act -- well, professional.

The 1998 baseball season will forever be remembered as the year Sweet Sammy and Mighty Mac chased Babe Ruth and Roger Maris, and they did it with class.

I was turned off to baseball when the major league baseball players went on strike and shut down the game in 1994. Baseball fans enjoy the illusion that the sport cares about us as much as we care about the sport. When management and the players took their eye off the ball and put it on money, I was disgusted and stopped watching for a few years.

During the summer of 1998 two sluggers, won me back. I was headed for the elevators at a local hospital when I heard the applause from a nearby waiting room. Immediately, I knew what happened. Mark McGwire belted his 62nd homer of the year. Of course, I left the elevator and walked into the waiting room to see the replay. Remarkable!

After the replay, as the camera focused on McGwire's teammates congratulating him, Sammy Sosa burst into the camera's view to add his best wishes. Incredible!

Some might say that Sosa was a good loser. Not me. I've never believed there is anything good about losing. I think Sammy is genuinely a nice guy who loves baseball. He wasn't about to miss celebrating the historic moment because McGwire hit 62 home runs before him.

Jealousy can break our spirit and muzzle our joy. Kingdom Christians can celebrate the successes of others because they love God's Kingdom and know that personal ambition must always yield to Kingdom celebration.

Finding Gold

I never liked Susan's blue Dodge.

Susan says I didn't like it because she made me trade in a perfectly good pickup to buy it. She was pregnant with our second son at the time and refused to ride in the pickup bed when he was born. So what else could we do? The two of us and two car seats wouldn't fit in the pickup, so without any research, we traded in the pickup and bought the car.

For ten years I didn't like that car. Even though Susan let me buy another pickup a couple of years later. It wasn't very reliable and didn't handle very well. The blue Dodge was a bad choice that we had to live with for a decade.

Two years ago, we traded in the old blue eye sore for a gold Chevy. We only got \$200.00 for it, but I was so glad to get rid of it I didn't argue with the salesman.

Before we settled on what car to buy, we went down to the book store and bought a half dozen books or magazines about the 1998 model cars. Price and safety were our major concerns. We scattered the books all over the dining room table and stayed up late into the night gathering information to help us make a good decision. After all, I didn't want another car like the last one.

Armed with hours of research we went from one car dealership to another looking for a car with the options we wanted at the best price. I explained to every salesman that we wouldn't make a counter offer, and I wasn't interested in speaking to their sales manager. I wanted their bottom-line-best-offer. By the end of the day, after we'd gathered several offers, I turned to Susan and asked, "Which one do you want?"

"I want the gold one," she said, "it's cute." We signed the papers and drove the new car off the lot.

It strikes me that most people will spend hours making a decision about what car to buy and never give their eternal soul a second thought. Why would they dismiss the claims of Christ without investigating them? It just doesn't make any sense.

By the way, I like the gold car. If you ask Susan, she will tell you it is because I didn't have to trade in my silver pickup to buy it, but I'll say it was a smart choice.

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How Can I Believe?

At my little sister's funeral people tried to comfort me with statements of faith like, "At least she's not suffering any more," or "She's in a better place." Though these people were right theologically, their words didn't touch my pain. My tears were not because of where she was, they flowed because of where she was not -- with the family. My own pain was compounded by watching the overwhelming grief of my parents. HOW could we continue to believe? It wasn't humanly possible.

I'd like to say that my faith has always been firm and never flickered, but if I did, I'd be lying. Don't get me wrong; I've never flirted with apostasy. I have no substantial disagreement with the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith or the 1963 Baptist Faith and Message. WHAT I believe isn't the issue, but there have been times I wondered HOW I could believe.

I've always felt so appreciated and loved while serving at the First Baptist Church of Alameda, New Mexico, but I've served elsewhere where I felt neither. Many a sleepless night I would lay awake wondering how the Bride of Christ could act so devilish. Though the experiences never affected my orthodoxy, it did shake my willingness to believe.

I didn't cry when the doctor told me I had cancer or later when he said I may never speak again. I was strong, because I thought I was supposed to be. One worship service, I stood on the stage next to the supply preacher as we began to sing the chorus "I Love you Lord." I mouthed the words as the congregation sang. Everything was fine until we got to the words "And I lift my voice." Tears streamed down my cheeks. I couldn't even lift my voice to praise the God I trusted in. HOW could He do this to me? HOW could I continue to believe?

I can relate to the words of the father who prayed: "Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief." (Mark 9:24 KJV)

I went to the office to gather some things to prepare to fly to Arkansas for Lori's funeral. While I was there, a church member stopped by and said, "Pastor, I just want you to know that I love you and will be praying for you." Those words helped my unbelief, and returned joy to my soul. Belief isn't always humanly possible; it takes divine help. Sometimes God intervenes and reminds us we are loved and that people care enough to pray for us.

Eternal Destiny

Larry worked long, hard hours as the manager of a feedlot, but always tried to find time to grow in his personal relationship with the Lord. After taking a four-week witnessing class at his church, he began to take a personal interest in one of his employees.

One afternoon he came straight from work to meet with Ed Rowell, his pastor. "Pastor," he said, "you need to go over to see 'Bubba' today."

"Why's that?" Ed asked.

"He's in some big trouble. The police stopped by the feedlot today and said they would arrest him tomorrow. Pastor, you've got to go see him, he really needs the Lord."

"I'll be glad to go with you to back you up," Ed said, "but you will need to do the talking." Reluctantly, Larry agreed.

Ed hopped in Larry's pickup and off they went. It was a long drive to Bubba's trailer--about 20 miles from the church-- the last five miles were a terrible dirt road. When they arrived, Ed was shocked at the living conditions. One corner of the trailer was sagging. There were old washing machines, junk cars and debris scattered all over the yard.

Reluctantly, Bubba invited them in. Old, broken-down furniture flanked the walls. A single 40-watt light bulb hung from the ceiling. Ed and Larry tried to cope with the foul smell as they sank into the couch.

It was an uncomfortable situation. Obviously, Bubba was embarrassed for his boss to see how he lived. Larry had a hard time getting to the point. The air was thick. Instead of rescuing Larry, Pastor Ed sat patiently as the evening unfolded. Finally, Bubba asked, "Well Larry, why did you come out here?"

That was all the prompting Larry needed. "Bubba," Larry said, "your life's a mess and you need the Lord!" Not exactly the approach I taught in class, Pastor Ed thought.

After a pause, Bubba said, "You're right. I do." Bubba prayed to receive Christ that night, but not because of the polished approach or snazzy presentation. Bubba responded to the love of his boss and the power of the simple gospel.

The prayer Bubba prayed didn't solve all his problem. The police came to the feedlot the next day and took him away in handcuffs. But his prayer did settle the most important question--his eternal destiny.

Keeping Score

At first, the only thing Susan and I agreed on was that we were in love and that we should be married. We disagreed about everything else.

Our tastes were direct opposites. To me, ordering delivery pizza, staying home, and watching a ball game was a perfect evening. Not Susan. She wanted to go out, walk around a mall, and eat Mexican food in a dimly lit room.

Though I'd envisioned all the ways a good wife would make my life better, I never really stopped to think about the reciprocal nature of the marriage relationship. I've got to tell you, I didn't have a clue. I understood what I wanted from her, but wasn't really sure what she needed from me.

"What's wrong honey?" I'd ask.

"Well if you don't know, I'm not going to tell you?" I wasn't the brightest candle on the cake. I usually didn't know.

For awhile, we worked out our differences by taking turns "getting our way." I don't quite remember when it happened, but after awhile, we didn't need to do that anymore. I started enjoying walks through the mall and Susan started watching an occasional ball game with me.

It is natural to want to keep score. "Since I went _____ with you the other day, will you do _____ with me?" But real joy comes in sacrificing without any expectations of something in return.

With time, I've come to value the things she does. Funny how that happens, isn't it? Yeah, we still argue, and sometimes get pretty mad at each other, but we've learned to treasure our differences as much as our similarities. After all, it was those differences sparked our initial attraction to each other.

That Special Feeling

I hope I never start talking about them as “the good old days,” but lately I’ve thought a lot about the early days of our marriage. Seventy-seven of us lived in a small, 600 square-foot apartment -- Susan, me and at least seventy-five roaches. Susan worked full-time at a nursery taking care of plants and I had a full-time job. I was also working on a Master’s degree 120 miles from our home.

We were busy.

When I felt the walls closing in on us, I’d reach for the phone a call Jim and Nell Blake. “Nell, I need some pampering, can we come up and see you next week?” She never said no.

Nell always kept a very nice home, but she never let it get in the way of making us feel comfortable. When we arrived, Nell greeted us at the door with a big hug and instructions to take our suitcases to “our room.” Usually, we’d sit at the table for a while and catch up on what was going on in each other’s lives. When Jim got home from work, we’d have a fine home cooked meal and retire to the living room. They always made me feel special.

Nell would spread a blanket she got from Mexico over her immaculate sofa, and I’d lay on the sofa and relax. The next morning, Jim and I usually left the girls to go get breakfast at “Norm’s,” L. A.’s best diner.

As the years went by, the Blake’s home remained an oasis to us. They watched our children while we took a cruise on our 10th anniversary. We attended their daughter’s wedding, shared many Thanksgiving turkeys and birthday steaks together. The last time I visited Jim and Nell, Nell and I placed flowers on his grave.

Every now and then, I wear one of his Hong Kong silk shirts under my suit. Somehow it makes me feel special -- like Jim and Nell always did.

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My Miracle

Sitting on the side of my hospital bed, the doctor tried to explain why I couldn't speak above a whisper. During the surgery to remove my cancerous thyroid, he tapped on my recurrent laryngeal nerve, thinking it was fatty tissue. Twice he asked for an instrument to sever the structure, but when he tried, his hand wouldn't move. Because he tapped on the nerve, it no longer transmitted the signal from the brain to the vocal cord, leaving my right vocal cord paralyzed. But, since he didn't cut the nerve, he felt normal function could return in a few months.

Clearly, God's hand kept him from cutting the nerve and I fully expected to get my voice back. Every morning when I awoke, I said "I love you, Susan." When the words came out in a whisper instead of a normal voice, I swallowed and thought, tomorrow--tomorrow will be the day. My miracle will come.

Tomorrow never came. I was confused the day I checked into the hospital for additional surgery to correct the problem. God where are You and why didn't You heal me?

Immediately after the surgery, my voice was strong, but after the swelling went down, I was left with a course, breathy voice that projected slightly above a whisper. Every day it got weaker -- and I grew more confused. Although the congregation encouraged me, I knew I was no longer a good preacher. My voice was too weak.

After a third surgery, I have a near-normal voice and usually have a strong preaching voice. Though I thanked God for giving Dr. Netterville the skill to heal me, I still wondered why God didn't intervene without surgery. That is until a comment the doctor made during a checkup. "Your nerve is transmitting enough signal that the vocal cord is staying healthy--not enough that it can ever move again, but enough to give a rich sound when supported by the silicone implant."

"Doctor, what would my voice sound like if the surgeon had cut the nerve instead of tapping it?"

I heard his voice and God's at the same time. He said, "Your voice would have always sounded hoarse," as God said, "See, you got your miracle after all."

Contentment

It was my sixth birthday.; I felt so special. We had a party with hats, pretty plates, special punch, and a great big birthday cake. All my friends came, which was good. All my friends came with presents, which was better. I made my wish, blew out the candles and smiled. I felt invincible on August 27, 1965, like everything would always go my way.

I was not quite thirteen. We lived on the plains of West Texas, where the wind howled, rattlesnakes slithered, and everyone worked hard. One afternoon, I was helping a farmer move his equipment from one section of land to another. He drove the tractor, I drove his bright red, new Chevrolet pickup.

I put my foot on the accelerator trying to catch up to him, when suddenly the wheels turned sharply as the front end hit a sandbar in the middle of the dirt road. The pickup flew from one side of the road to the other until, finally, I lost control. It crashed into a bar ditch through a barb wired fence onto a nearby field. The impact thrust me through the windshield leaving me bleeding, dirty, and disoriented. I didn't feel invincible.

Most days, I'm not the birthday boy. People don't bring presents and there are no candles to blow out. Neither do I go crashing through the windshield of the boss' pickup.

Today is somewhere between those experiences. Not everything will go right, but neither will everything go wrong.

We are not better because of the sum of our good experiences, nor are we worse because of our negative ones. Life is full of both. How we handle prosperity and adversity shows everyone who we really are. Our attitude determines our happiness.

"I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances." (Philippians 4:11)

Starting Over

I was working at a gas station for a short time when I was a teenager. On some days I busted flats in the back room. On other days I worked at a satellite station across town running the cash register. My boss let me work on my own pickup in the grease pit when the business was slow.

My Universal joints were slipping and needed replacing. I decided to take care of it myself instead of paying a local mechanic to do the job. The mechanic showed me how to do it. He told me to take special care when I put it back together. "No problem," I said. After all I was 17, I knew everything.

I took the drive shaft off and tried to replace the joints. I learned two things that day. #1. I'm not a mechanic! #2. It is easier to take something a part than to put it back together.

I forced the pieces together, the pins came out of alignment--I walked home from work that day. I tried to figure a way to repair the joint but decided it couldn't be done. The next day I walked back into the part store to order another set of joints.

There was no alternative, I had to start over. The mechanic had a knowing smirk on his face when I placed the order, it was humbling to me, but I had no choice.

Would you like to make a fresh start in your life? Allow God to clean the slate, you can start over with His help. It is humbling, but it is refreshing.

God wants to shape you into His image. You are in the hands of God like the clay in the hands of a potter. "But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him." Jeremiah 18:4

Stress

The alarm clock screams at you at an ungodly hour. Your kids can't find their socks, won't look for them, and expect you to know where they are. The milk and your husband have something in common . . . they are both spoiled. He's upset because he wants to hear "snap, crackle, and pop" while he reads the paper. If he mentions the milk one more time you're fully prepared to give him "snap, crackle and pop!" It won't be in his cereal bowl.

You look at your watch, "Oh no late again." You rush through your routine, get dressed as fast as you can. "I can't be late again." Oh No! Your last pair of hose just got a run. Isn't that the way it always is?

Dressed in your best jeans, you turn the key in the car. NOTHING! Your car won't start. What a day, your hose runs and your car won't!

There's a note on your desk when you finally arrive to work.. The boss wants to see you. "Great, what now?"

Sound familiar? How does a vacation sound to you right now? Where can you find rest when the world is closing in on you? Jesus said: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. (Matthew 11:28)

Enemies

I liked church fellowships when I was a boy. After the meal, the kids always ran outside to play in the backyard of the church which adjoined cotton fields to the south and east. We waited until it was pitch dark, then we started playing "hide and go seek." The cotton fields were "out of bounds," but there were plenty of bushes and alcoves to hide in.

You remember the game, don't you? The person who is "it" hides their eyes then counts to 100 while everyone else finds hiding places. If "it" finds and touches you, you lose and become "it." However, "it" could not "get you" if you ran to "the safe place."

I remember the sheer terror when "it" walked past my hiding place. I never liked someone pursuing me. It was a creepy feeling. I'd hold my breath and try not to make a single peep. "It" wanted nothing more than to get me . . . I knew it and did everything I could to keep from getting "got."

There are people in real life who think they are "it" and are out "to get you!" They don't like you, and will do you harm if they get the chance. It may be a jealous co-worker, a hostile ex-spouse, or a feuding family member.

Where is God when your enemies pursue you? Does He care? Yes! He is your "safe place." Moses experienced God's protection. God said: "When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by." (Exodus 33:22). Call on God and let Him "hide your soul in the cleft of the rock."

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Purity

My Grandfather was a hardworking, custom combine operator. He worked long, hard hours. Life was never easy for him, but I don't think he ever wanted an easy life. My Grandmother? Now that's another story. She tried to live a pampered life on the road. Grandlady insisted that Grumps buy her an air conditioned Pontiac for her to drive down the harvest trail from Texas to Montana. Grumps was more comfortable in his Chevy truck with the gun rack on the back window.

One summer, my Grandparents followed the harvest trail through the community where my family lived. I have very pleasant memories of that trip. We visited with my Grandlady in her trailer and ate at "The Green Frog Cafe" with my Grumps.

I also have some unpleasant memories of the visit. One hot, windy summer day, Grumps invited me to ride on his combine with him. This was not one of those luxury "Jonnie poppers," (his term for John Deere tractors with air conditioned cabs). We were riding high on his red Massey. No air conditioning, no cab, no options . . . just a plain ole "working man's" machine.

The day began with a burning pride. I was proud of my Grumps, I loved being with him. He let me play in the grain bin, and even steer the machine. After a few hours, I was through, ready to go home. My pride turned to burning scratches. I learned an important lesson that day, you don't scratch the chaff itches,. They only get worse.

I begged Grumps to take me home, but he didn't. After all, he was a working man with a job to do. He let me off the combine to sit in the truck waiting for nightfall.

The itching was unbearable,. I couldn't wait to get home. When we arrived, I ran to the bathroom and took the best, hottest bath in the world. I was the first 10 year old in the history of mankind that ever wanted to take a bath. Why? The filth of the field was so great, I had to get clean.

Purity . . . it is a real blessing to those who know the pain of filth. "Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God." (Matthew 5:8)

Pride

What virtue is impossible to have if you know you have it? If you have it, and know it, you don't have it. If you work towards it, and finally achieve it, you'll become proud of it and lose it. Give up?

The answer is humility. It is as slippery as black ice, as difficult to define as it is to achieve. What is humility?

John never boasts, he doesn't think much of himself. He is afraid to assert himself, thinking others will discover his lack of worth. John is a "wall flower" at every party and a "doormat" in every relationship.

Mary is as subtle as a neon sign. She walks into a room announcing her presence with her boisterous gate. Her favorite subject . . . herself.

Who demonstrates more humility, Mary or John? Answer, neither. Both are self absorbed. They view other people as the support cast and themselves the primary actor in life's drama.

A humble person puts the spotlight on God and sees herself as a support for others. She is a giving, loving, caring person.

Jesus demonstrated a good working definition of humility in Matthew 11:29, "Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls." Notice that He sees Himself in the role of helper. He helps others find rest. His humility does not turn Him into a "doormat." He said "learn from Me," not "walk on me." Jesus was confident in what He could do and secure in who He was.

The Living Word

How important is a word? Writers search for just the right word to "punch" an idea. Parents anxiously wait for their child's first word. Do you remember the tension in the court room when O.J. was waiting to hear the word "not" before the word guilty?

A single word is important. A careless one can destroy; an encouraging one can build.

Our entire universe came from a word. It was God's word. "For He spoke, and it came to be . . ." (Psalm 33:9a) It was the creative word of God.

Jesus is God's final word. Aristotle, in his artistic proofs, mentioned three things that convince people: the ethos, pathos and logos. The ethos is a speaker's credibility. It is the way we feel about her. Pathos is a "gut feeling," an inner voice that convinces us. The logos is the final word. It is the undisputable logic behind an argument.

John chose "logos" to describe Jesus. He said: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." (John 1:1) Jesus is the final, ultimate expression of God to us. He is the saving Word of God.

God began the world with a word, redeemed the world with a word, and He guides the world with His word. Does God still speak? Can we hear Him?

The Bible is God's living word. If we listen, we can hear. Hebrews 4:12 says: "For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart."

"Living and active . . ." Is God's word living in you? It is if you are living in His word. Would you like the Bible to come alive in your life?

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This Little Light of Mine

Is your idea of camping staying in Motel 6 instead of the Holiday Inn? Not us. The Wilson's are campers. We love to pitch a tent or crawl into our camper and spend a night or a week in the wilderness.

Campers are a special breed. We love the challenges of nature and the adventures of "roughing it." Over the years I've developed a few survival skills. Now don't get me wrong,. I'm not saying I could rival Davy Crockett or actually live off the land.

My survival skills consist of things like: using less than 2 gallons of water to shower, or catching a fish with hundreds of dollars of equipment, or recharging my laptop battery with a power inverter while driving to town. We're pretty fond of leaving our mountain retreat to drive to town to get an A&W Root Beer Hamburger. Do you get the picture?

I do claim one legitimate survival skill -- holding a flashlight steady while someone else fixes something. I came by this skill honestly while just a boy. When Dad needed to fix something, I'd hold the light so he could see. If I got bored and looked around, the beam of the flashlight would follow the direction of my eye. Dad would yell at me and I'd refocus the light on the problem so my Father could fix it.

Hmmm. That sounds a lot like witnessing, doesn't it?. Focusing the light on the problem so my Heavenly Father can fix it.

"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. [15] "Nor do men light a lamp, and put it under the peck-measure, but on the lampstand; and it gives light to all who are in the house. [16] "Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven." (Matthew 5:14-16 NASB)

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A Fresh Start

Spring (Ah-Ah-Ah-Choo), is in the air. Yeah, I know about the allergies, but other than that, I love Spring. Don't you?

The trees around our home are blooming, the birds are dusting off their feathers and warming up their voices, and the sun is getting ready for summer. Utility bills are lower because it isn't hot enough to need the air conditioner yet, and it isn't cold enough for the heater either. Not too hot or cold, it is just right.

The "boys of summer" are putting on their leggings and getting ready to connect the hickory with leather. (The sound of Angels clapping their hands.) Can life get any better than this?

Next month the Fish & Game department will start stocking the mountain streams in New Mexico with some hungry 'bows ready to swallow my hook. Many people start their calendar year with January 1. Not me. Fishin' season starts April 1, (Hmmm, April fools day, a fitting day to begin fishing season) and that's when my new year begins.

There is something exciting about new beginnings. Our minds close the door on the past as we walk into the future. Paul knew the secret power in a fresh start as he wrote., "forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 3:13b-14)

What Was it Like to Know?

“But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.” (Luke 2:19 NASB)

The headlines in 1942 included the allied forces victory of the battle of the Midway. In Boston, there was a tragic fire in the Coconut Grove night club that killed 491. Byron Nelson won the Masters in a playoff victory and Stanton Delaplane of the San Francisco Chronicle won the Pulitzer Prize for reporting.

No one noticed the birth of a baby in Louisville, Kentucky. As an adult, he won an Olympic gold medal in 1960 and the heavyweight crown in 1964. His mother named him Cassius Clay. We know him as Muhammad Ali.

Do you think his mother knew that he would change history? Probably not.

In 1889, New York won the National League Pennant with an 83-43 season. Washington joined the union as our 42nd State, and the Indian territory of Oklahoma was opened for settlement. On a sadder note, thousands died in a Johnstown Pennsylvania flood.

Americans had no idea that half way around the world a baby was born in Braunau, Austria that would alter their future. Do you think Mrs. Hitler knew that she was holding pure human terror in her arms? No, surely she didn't.

Quirinius was governor, and Augustus the King decided to take a census. Some brilliant men noticed some celestial lights in the sky.

In a Bethlehem barn, a little boy was born who would change history. Do you think Mary knew that her Son would save the world? What was it like to hold the Son of God in her arms? How did it feel to see His arms outstretched on the cross?

What was it like to know?

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Make it Happen

“Above anything else, I hate to lose.” (Jackie Robinson)

On April 15, 1947, Robinson made it to the “show.” He became the first black man to wear a Major League uniform, destroying the color barrier in professional sports.

In his first season with the Brooklyn Dodgers, he hit .297, sent 12 over the fence, and led the league with 29 steals. He was also the National League Rookie of the year. Two years later they named him the National League’s Most Valuable Player when he won the batting title with a .342 average. 1949 was his first of six appearances in the All-Star game.

During his ten years with the Dodgers, he helped them reach the World Series six times. Robinson had a career batting average of .311 and was inducted into the Hall of Fame in 1962, his first year of eligibility.

Did you also know that Jackie Robinson was court-martialed from the Army and that he dropped out of College?

Failure need not be fatal. Great men accomplish great things even when they suffer great setbacks and disappointments.

“Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. (Philip.pians 3:13-14)

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Walking in His Grace

You can buy it in a grocery store, a drug store, the mall, from a street vendor, at a baseball game, and in a school cafeteria. It comes in red, pink, brown, white, white with black specks, green, green with black specks, and orange. It is very cold, but sometimes people put hot stuff on top of it.

It will make you fat if you eat too much, it can give you a headache if you eat it too fast, it will hurt your teeth if you have any cavities, it can clog your arteries of the old, and promote blemishes on the young.

You can get it by the gallon, quart, pint or cup. Some people use a cone to hold it, others put it on top of a banana, others melt it with milk and drink it through a straw.

What is it? Ice Cream of course. I scream, you scream, we all scream for . . . I'm sure you know the rest.

Words cannot adequately describe the taste, texture, and feelings that correspond to eating an ice cream cone on a hot summer day. Some things are best left to experience.

Grace? Yeah, I can define it -- God's unmerited favor. I can distinguish it from mercy. Grace is getting what you don't deserve, mercy is not getting what you do deserve. I can sing about it -- "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound . . ." These exercises are routine and lifeless compared to walking in His grace..

My own grace experiences leaves me wanting more. So I pray,

Help me Lord to look past my needs to see my sins.
So I'll not be satisfied with the way things have been.
Help me peel back my pride and admit I'm to blame.
Let me know your forgiveness, release me from my shame.

Let me Brush next to your glory, let me see your face.
Fill me Lord, Anoint me Lord, drench me with your grace.
So I can fight the good fight, and run the good race.
Let me have your blessings, pour them out in this place.

"For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast." (Ephesians 2:8-9)

God's Will

Does knowing God's will impact what you do and don't do? There are some things we know are God's will. We know God wants us to read our Bible, pray, and attend Church. I don't have to pray about whether I should love my wife or provide for my children.

Other things require a search for the will of God. Sometimes God's will shows us that we are to do something, other times He shows us something that we shouldn't do.

David was a man after God's own heart. We remember him best for his courageous stand against Goliath the Philistine. Though Goliath was a seasoned warrior of great reputation, David would not let "that uncircumcised Philistine" mock the armies of God.

The young shepherd boy took his sling shot, five smooth stones, and the confidence of a man on a mission from God into battle. In the center of God's will, David lost his fear, and Goliath lost his head. David was willing to do God's will after he learned it.

David was a doer, yet one time God stopped David from doing something. He stopped him from building the temple, not because David was evil, but because God had other plans for him. David showed he was willing not to do something because of God's direction.

Do you want to know God's will or do you want to do God's will? Most people have a natural curiosity to want to know what God wants, but that does not mean they are willing to do it.

"And He went a little beyond them, and fell on His face and prayed, saying, 'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as Thou wilt.'" (Matthew 26:39 NASB)

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The Small Things

Laying on Susan's lap, I didn't know what was more beautiful, her big brown eyes or the clear blue sky. One thing I knew for sure, I'd found the girl of my dreams. I was in love. I took a long piece of grass and wove a ring out of it and put it on her finger. You know, the little things are the important things.

Susan made me a fishing pouch out of an old nail apron. She attached it to a belt on the back and applied Velcro strips on front to keep its contents from spilling out. I keep a telescopic spinning rod and reel in the pouch.

I like to have the spinning rod with me when I am fly fishing the streams for when I come upon a pond. The other day, I put an 1/8 oz. jig on it and was going deep for big trout. When I cast it, something felt strange. I looked down at the rig, and sure enough it was broken. I lost a small screw that attached the bail to the reel. It was now worthless. You know, the little things are the important things.

It was a small stone that David used to kill the giant. The little boy brought just a few fish and loaves of bread to feed 5000.

Whether it is a loving pat on the back or a kind word or a thoughtful note, the little things are the important things.

Do something important this week. Show a small gesture to someone in need. You know, the little things are the important things.

"The master said, 'Well done, my good and faithful servant. You have been faithful in handling this small amount, so now I will give you many more responsibilities. Let's celebrate together!'" (Matthew 25:23 NLT)

It is the small things that show where our heart is.

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Our Nature

“What did the preacher talk about this morning?” the mother asked her young son.

“I don’t know, I think it was sin,” replied the little boy.

“What did he say about it?”

“I’m not really sure, but I’m pretty sure he was against it.” Preachers do talk about sin a lot. It’s their nature.

Pine trees have a beautiful smell and majestic appearance, but their sound is rather plain. I love to hear the wind rustle through the leaves of Colorado’s aspen trees. It ranks right up there with listening to the waves beating down a sandy shore or the sound of the dinner bell.

Aspen trees have tall, slender trunks that grow straight toward the sun. On a steep mountainside, they look like they are growing crooked, but they aren’t. The ground is sloped, they are straight. It’s their nature.

I suppose that’s the way we are with sin. Aspen trees point straight up to the sky, dogs chase after bones, pigs head for the mud hole, and people gravitate toward sin. It’s our nature.

Have you ever noticed that you don’t have to teach a child to disobey?

Where do they learn that? It takes forever to potty-train them, a staff of teachers to teach them to read, and a zillion years for them to learn table manners, but you never have to spend a single moment teaching them to sin. Why is that?

Sin is really easy to pick up;. We come by it naturally. It is too bad that it is harder to get rid of than it is to acquire. It takes more than preaching against it; it requires our repentance and Christ’s forgiveness.

When we repent, we turn from sin and towards Christ. When we do, we find forgiveness from our past and the freedom not to sin for our future. It’s supernatural.

“If we confess our sins to Him, He is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from every wrong. (1 John 1:9 NLT)

What Now?

Okay, you've made a mistake, What now? Here are some options:

Option 1: Make sure you don't get caught. At all cost, cover your tracks. Spend all your efforts keeping others from knowing you were wr___. (Never say the "w" word.) Now the age old question: If you are going 75 MPH in a 55 MPH speed zone, but there are no police around, are you really speeding? If nobody saw it, it didn't happen.

Option 2: If detected, divert attention elsewhere. Discovery changes everything. You must change your tactics. Maybe you were wr___. (never say the "w" word,) but it wasn't your fault. Who do you blame? Who's handy? Let's see. You can blame your boss who "didn't clarify" the assignment. You can blame the company that "didn't provide enough resources." The truth is, it doesn't matter. . . blame your mother, the Easter Bunny, or society at large. The point is, it wasn't your fault.

Option 3 Options one and two didn't work? Oh no, you're in trouble now. Okay, it's getting pretty hairy now. Go ahead and admit you are wr___. (Go ahead, you'll have to say the "w" word.) Tell them you are wrong, BUT . . . But what? Doesn't matter. Excuses are your last chance to get off the hook. Tell them some "hard luck" story, the "dog ate your homework," or "the bus was late," or "it's a computer error." Anything will work.

Or . . . you could just admit you were wrong, ask for forgiveness and learn something from your mistake. You decide.

Remaining Faithful

“But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.” (Isaiah 40:31)

It is HOT. I don't mean warm or toasty, it is HOT! The weatherman says it is unseasonably HOT. We expect extreme heat in the summer, but not in the early spring.

God designed the world to run in seasons or cycles. They are predictable movements of nature. Have you ever considered the cycles of your Christian life? God promised to give you seasonal strength if you will wait upon the Lord. (Isaiah 40:31).

ECSTASY. "They shall mount up with wings as eagles." An eagle spreads its wings and soars upon the wind. There is no strenuous effort involved, only a dependence on the wind and an enjoyment of the journey. Christians experience seasons of inexpressible ecstasy, moments of deep worship and praise.

ENERGY. "They shall run and not be weary." The cheetah runs fast, but it does not run far because it grows tired. God promises you an inexhaustible source of energy. Christians experience seasons of energy, moments of ministry and service.

ENDURANCE. "They shall walk and not faint." Turtles do not have the perspective of the eagle or the grace of a cheetah, but they know how to endure. The snapping turtle is legendary for its determination to bite and hold. Christians experience seasons of endurance, moments of faith and hope.

My favorite season is fall. I love the cool evenings and the beautiful colors. Winter is too cold, summer is too hot, and spring is too sneezy. The fall -- it is just right. Unfortunately, I can't control the seasons.

I'd rather soar like an eagle or sprint like a cheetah than crawl around like a turtle. Unfortunately, I can't control the seasons. All I can do is remain faithful and wait upon the Lord.

Should We feed Our Kids?

We decided not to feed our kids this month. We think this will save us quite a bit of money, and we need it. Why?

We have some unexpected medical bills. The doctors want their money; we have to pay our bills. What will people think of us if we don't?

Our anniversary was a couple of weeks ago. I went a little over budget for our anniversary meal. We have to cut back somewhere.

We're planning a vacation next month. Have you seen gas prices lately? This trip is going to cost us a fortune. We've been working hard, we deserve the trip.

I really need some new fishing tackle. I plan on doing a lot of fishing. Lures aren't cheap, and I have quite a habit of losing them.

Wait a minute. These are our kids and our money. If we don't want to feed them it is our business. Don't push your convictions on us. You may think it is important to feed your kids, but that doesn't mean you have the right to tell us to feed ours.

Why is it so easy it is to find an excuse for something you don't want to do? Have you noticed that you always find a way to pay for things that are really important to you?

Relax, I'm going to feed my kids this month. I'll also give my tithe to the church because it is really important to me.

“Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the Lord of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it.” (Malachi 3:10 KJV)

Purity In Speech

What is the first vacation you remember taking with your family? For me, it was a trip to Yellowstone National Park. The sights were breathtaking and the water was crystal clear. Dad taught us how to kneel beside the clear stream, and cup our hand to drink the clear water.

We just returned from a family vacation in the Colorado Rockies. Do you think I passed that lesson on to my children? Not on your life. We drank bottled water.

I wouldn't drink water from a stream without taking extreme measures to purify it. Unfortunately, there is too much pollution in our nation's water supply to drink untreated water.

Poisoned water can cause stomach problems and even death in some cases. A contaminated water supply has killed the population of entire villages in under privileged nations. It is a serious problem.

How much poison does it take to make water impure? Not much. Just a trace can ruin an entire supply.

A poisonous tongue can ruin people's reputation or cause them extreme pain. Words hurt!

It doesn't take much gossip, cussing, or back talking to pollute our speech. Soon people will label us as "gossips," "foul-mouthed," or "smart-alecks." Those labels are easy to earn and almost impossible to shed.

“But the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.” (James 3:8 KJV)

Going for the Goal

I always wanted to dunk a basketball, but never could. I could get over the rim when I didn't have a ball in my hand, but couldn't grip the ball and get up high enough to slam it. My reach was beyond my grasp.

Paul gave us his formula for "Going for the Goal" in Philippians 3:13-14: "Forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward calling of God in Christ Jesus."

You can't go for the goal if you are playing the wrong game. At one time, Paul pursued the goal of being the best rule keeper around. He made a pretty good Pharisee, but God had another plan for him. Paul had to adapt his personal goals to follow God's will for His life.

You can't go for the goal if you are living in the past. Perhaps God has more for us than the way we've always done things. You can't press on if you are living in yesterday.

You can't go for the goal if you never show up for the game. God deserves your best effort. His kingdom is of the utmost importance, it is our first priority. Yet, many people treat their Christian life with reckless disregard. If you were as loyal on the job as you are to Christ would you get a promotion or fired?

I never dunked a basketball, but I did solve the problem. How? I became the best football player I could become. Some bodies are not designed to live above the rim. They function better on the bottom of a pile.

Guardian Angels

Lady was a big, black, beautiful German Shepherd mix. Susan got her for "free." You know what that means don't you? The owner says: "If you'll pay for the shots, feed her, build her a house, repair the yard she destroys, and mend the fence she breaks, I'll not charge you to take her off my hands." Free -- that word should not be allowed in reference to an animal.

She was our first family dog, we all loved her. She was less than a year old and Jamie was entering Kindergarten . . . I suppose they were about the same age in "dog years."

Lady had a terrible habit of digging in the back yard and crawling under the fence to run in the corn field across the road from our house. Eventually we bought a "doggie" fence that *zzzzzzzzzzzz*apped her when she tried to escape.

One sunny afternoon I got a call from Susan. "Jim, Lady got out and Jamie went chasing after her . . . I don't know where they are."

I know it made perfect sense to Jamie to chase after the dog. After all, he was SIX years old! A big boy like him can take care of just about everything. He can tie his own shoes, pour his own catsup, and can certainly cross four lane roads safely, right?

I did two things immediately. First, I began to pray that God would watch over him. Second, I got in the car and went looking for him.

Thirty minutes later we found them a half a mile and several busy streets from the house. Do I believe in guardian angels? I do now, especially when I look into Jamie's big brown eyes.

“I Swear”

You're aiming for the 16 penny nail, instead you hit the thumb nail, what happens?
xozijdahfouerkha!

The guy in front of you cuts you off, what happens? xozijdahfouerkha! ! None of us
enjoy other people's foul language, yet, most of us have used xozijdahfouerkha before. Why do
we swear?

Swearing is an attempt to bring control to an uncontrollable situation. We like to think
we have it all under control. Life enjoys reminding us that we don't. Those moments cause a
knee-jerk reaction.

Swearing is a bad habit. People begin swearing to shock their peers and get attention, but
it really shows a lack of basic intelligence. Some folks don't know how to express themselves
without expletives.

Swearing shows who you serve. You can't turn on the radio, television, or go shopping
without exposure to foul language. The other day I was thumbing through a magazine at the
doctor's office and was shocked by what I read. Christian's pure language make them stand out
in a crowd, their foul language embarrasses their Lord, Church, family, and self.

James 3:11 asks: "Can a fountain give fresh and bitter water?" Of course it can't. When
you use bitter language your friends will not believe the fresh gospel coming from your mouth.
Oh, by the way, next time ask a family member to hold the nail for you before you swing the
hammer. On second thought, maybe not.

Broken

I was “rough housing” in the living room with my brother when I knocked one of my mother’s ornamental coal-oil lamps off of the mantle. I tried to catch it, but couldn’t, and it shattered into a zillion pieces.

I cleaned up the mess, but knew I could never replace the broken lamp. I can still see the look of disappointment in my mother’s eyes when she discovered my mischief.

A broken lamp is useless, but some things need to be broken before they are useful. A farmer doesn’t plant his crop in cement. He chooses good soil, breaks it up, and sows the seed. Unbroken soil does not produce abundant crops, but cultivated soil incubates life. A butterfly could never flutter in the spring air without breaking its cocoon, neither could an eaglet emerge without breaking its shell.

Jesus could not feed the five thousand until He broke the bread (Mark 8:1-8). The sinful woman could not pour the costly perfume over Jesus until she broke the alabaster box (Luke 7:37). God could not reconcile Himself to sinful man until He broke down the wall that separated us and Him (Ephesians 2:14). We can never know salvation without Jesus’ broken body (1 Corinthians 11:24).

We are not useful until we are broken. David wrote: “The sacrifice you want is a broken spirit. A broken and repentant heart, O God, you will not despise” (Psalm 51:17 NLT).

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Highways and Hedges

“Go out into the highways and hedges and compel them to come in that my house may be full.” (Luke 14:23).

When I was a young evangelist, I saw God win those in the "highways and hedges." Our revival team held services in the evening and taught witnessing seminars in the mornings. After lunch we met back at the church to go into “the highways and the hedges” to share our faith.

We saw people saved on a daily basis. One afternoon stands out in my memory. We were conducting a revival in the California Bay Area. We held the witness training, then went out into the community. Ten minutes after we left the Church, just 20 feet from the front door of the church, a 25-year-old man was reborn. He led his wife to the Lord within 24 hours of his own salvation. During the revival, he and his wife both made their commitments to Christ public.

When I was a young pastor I saw God win those in the "highways and hedges." I made a commitment that everyone within a mile of our church would hear from us at least three times a year. We sent out mail, telephoned them, and knocked on their door. The second time we knocked on the Beck's door, Lennie and Kathy came to our service. Fifteen years later they are still faithful members of that church. Before I moved from there, it was my great joy to pray for him at his Deacon ordination.

Does God still win those in the “highways and hedges?” I don't know. I haven't been out there in a long time.

Amazing Grace

My favorite year of school was the fifth grade. Mrs. Walls, my teacher, was in total control of her classroom. If a child misbehaved, she took him out into the hall where she either scolded him or applied the board of education to the seat of learning. Yes, corporal punishment was still legal in those days.

I made that trip to the hallway with her on at least one occasion. Most of the time, I didn't need her scolding or paddling.. Her love for teaching and for me kept me in line.

Her classroom was very structured. Every week, we would change seats. The person whose chair was in the front row would move it to the back, and everyone else would move forward one place. Although today I have a preference for the back row, in those days, I liked the front row.

If you excelled on an assignment, or was exceptionally well-behaved, she would let you be the black board monitor or the leader for the march to the lunch room. We learned, in her structured classroom, that the "good children" received the rewards, while the misbehaved were passed over.

In the economy of God's grace it doesn't work that way. I can't earn his favor.

Have you ever plunged into despair only to float in God's grace? Did you feel the touch of an unseen hand encouraging you?

Member's Only

My brothers formed a club when I was five years old. They had a neat clubhouse (an old, dusty tool shed), a thriving membership (three or four other kids), and a membership policy (you had to be at least six years old to join).

Do the math -- I was out! "I can't wait until next year," I said, "then I'll be old 'nough to join your club." My brother was quick to reply, "By then the age requirement will be seven."

Now, don't start feeling sorry for me. The truth is, I was a scrawny little "tag-a-long" brother. I'm sure my brothers got tired of having to walk slower so I could keep up, or watching me while Mom and Dad went somewhere. They just wanted some peace and quiet.

Have you ever been left out of something important? How did it make you feel?

I remember the first building program I ever led. At that time, the church averaged 25 people and yet they sold their small building to relocate and build a much larger building. With the help of other churches, we successfully built a building at a cost of \$27.00 per square foot, about half the going rate. You would think that in such a small church everyone would get involved. They didn't. After the building program, one family criticized me for not nudging them to get involved when they did not respond to the general appeal. I thought, "Great, not only did you leave me to do most of the work, but now I'm the bad guy because you didn't do your part." Why were they mad? They felt left out.

Being left out of a club, or a building program is one thing. Missing eternal life is another entirely.

Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. (John 3:3 KJV)

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Valley of the Shadow

Bubbly, joyous, effervescent, happy, jazzed, energized, vivacious, are these words that describe the Christian experience? Or do words like serious, melancholy, contemplative, deliberate, pious, and thoughtful better capture the Christian spirit. Which song best characterizes the daily walk of the disciple, "I've got joy, joy, joy, down in my heart," or "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty?"

Elijah probably experienced a rush of faith when he faced the prophets of Baal. The children of Israel tried to serve both God and Baal. The prophet of the Lord challenged the prophets of Baal to a contest to show the people who they should serve. The prophets of Baal could not call down fire from heaven, but Elijah could.

Elijah's prayer did not rhyme. He did not use beautiful metaphors. It did not sound like a litany, but God honored it! He stated his purpose: "Let it be known this day that thou art God," his motive: "and that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at thy word." Then, he gave his request: "Hear me O Lord, hear me . . ." (1 Kings 18:36-37) After this short, terse, humble prayer, God responded: "Then the fire of the Lord fell, and consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench." (1 Kings 18:38)

You would think that Elijah would be flying high after this victory, but he wasn't. The next time we catch up to him he is in the pit of depression: "Then he went on alone into the desert, traveling all day. He sat down under a solitary broom tree and prayed that he might die. 'I have had enough, Lord,' he said. 'Take my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.'" (1 Kings 19:4 NLT).

The Christian life is not mono-dimensional. Our faith does not dissolve our anguish nor does it negate our personalities. It does, however, give us a context for our problems and strength for our challenges.

God never promised that we would bypass the "valley of the shadow of death," but He did say He would walk with us.

Out of Gas

Susan and I entered into our marriage with equal assets and liabilities. I had an old Ford Courier pick-up and she had a Mazda sports car. She owed some money on some family land in Colorado and I owed a couple thousand dollars on my student loan from college.

The debts were more permanent than the automobiles. It took nearly ten years to pay off both those debts. That's all right though. I consider them good investments. We still enjoy the use of the family property during the summers and my mind is still functioning (it is good to own your brain free and clear). The automobiles? Now that's a different story.

Within the first year of our marriage, the car was totaled in an accident, and the pickup threw a rod. We fixed the pickup and bought another car.

I was glad to get rid of that old Mazda. I never liked it. It was hard to get into the car. God designed my body for a pick-up truck, not one of those low riding sports cars. But the real reason I didn't like that car was because the gas gauge didn't work. I can't tell you the number of times Susan called me from a pay phone to pick her up after the car ran out of gas.

It is a real feeling of helplessness to have to stand beside a multi-thousand dollar car that won't run because it needs a couple of bucks worth of gas. She'd raise the hood, call me, and wait beside the car until I arrived.

Ever been there? Have you ever run out of spiritual energy? Too bad we don't have a spiritual gas gauge. Then again, maybe we do. Next time we get that "stressed out" feeling, perhaps we should take it as a warning that we're running low on fuel and find a way to fill our tanks.

"But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint." (Isaiah 40:31 KJV)

Teamwork

The final seconds on the clock were ticking down. It was fourth and goal. We were behind by just a few points against a rival school. A touchdown would mean victory. Our quarterback called time out and went to the sidelines to get a play from the coach.

The manager brought water for the players. Between swallows of water and the surreal feeling of sweat cascading from every pore came shouts of "we can do it," or "this is it!"

The quarterback returned with the play. He knelt on one knee and said "Listen up." In the huddle there was muffled silence. He looked at our halfback and said, "The ball is yours," and called a play to the right side of the line -- my side of the line. I immediately visualized plowing the strong side tackle into the ground, our halfback running through a hole the size of the grand canyon and scoring.

While I was processing this thought, the left side guard began to argue with the call. He said this call is exactly what our opponents were looking for. He felt we needed to run a screen pass and catch our opponents by surprise. Finally, the quarterback said, we're going to run the play coach called, then, called for the huddle to break.

From a three-point stance, I exploded into my man and drove him into the linebacker. I fully expected to rise from my block to the cheers of the crowd. I didn't. Someone tackled our half back before he penetrated the goal line. The gun sounded. We lost.

What went wrong? The left guard came out of his stance and stood straight up without attempting to throw a block. His man caught the halfback in the backfield and took him to the ground. His choice not to throw his block because he didn't get his way was unacceptable, and had severe consequences. It cost us the game.

"Behold, how good and how pleasant it is For brothers to dwell together in unity!"
(Psalm 133:1 NASB)

Prayer

How important is your prayer life? How would you describe prayer to a new believer?

Personal

Prayer is Personal. Hallmark can express our sentiments with their well written cards, but no gesture is as personal as prayer. When you care enough to send the very best, send your prayers.

Refreshing

Not long ago, I was having a conversation with one of our members after losing my little sister to lupus. When I told Mrs. Cuevas about Lori's passing, and the phone call I got early in the morning from my mother, she said "Pastor, I was praying for you at that time." God knew I needed extra strength and He had one of our lovely ladies praying for me just when I needed prayer the most. It is refreshing to know that God loves us enough to prompt people to pray for us.

Always

The scripture teaches us to "Pray without ceasing." How important are your prayers? They are so important to God that He wants you to be in a prayerful attitude all the time.

Yes

When you pray, you are saying YES to God. Jesus wrestled with His destiny in the Garden of Gethsemane., but concluded His prayer by saying, "not my will, but thine be done." Are you saying yes to God?

I fear that the most common lie told in church is "I'll be praying for you." Prayer is not a word to throw around lightly. It is the key to our Christian existence and the power of our Christian witness.

God Sightings

Have you heard anyone talk about their grandchildren lately? If you will listen, most grandparents are more than happy to tell you how little Johnny took his first step, is learning to drive, or is about to go to college. To hear the proud grandparent tell the story, you'd think they were the first to have the experience. Most of us are willing to indulge the story teller with polite attention.

Why is there such a strong compulsion to talk about our surgeries? I've never enjoyed these conversations. Just in case you are wondering, I don't want to view the video of your surgery or see your gall stones in the jar. Yet, I find myself telling stories about my own recent surgeries. Why is that? I know people really aren't interested, yet I often find myself starting sentences with, "Well, during my second surgery, I . . ."

If the Academy honored story telling, they would have to have a "somebody done me wrong" category. Most of us have at least one of these stories and we relish in retelling them. Of course, we were totally in the right and they were absolutely wrong, no gray area here. It seems with the passing of time that they get more wrong and we get more right. Telling these stories gives us a feeling of moral superiority.

The Bible is full of stories, too. They are "God sightings." Did you hear the one where a teenage boy killed a giant with a stone and a slingshot? How about the time a preacher made a giant fish sick to its stomach and it vomited him on the shore? Have you seen God at work in your life lately? Instead of talking about your grandchildren, surgeries, or how "somebody did you wrong," why not talk about how God is at work in your life? Now that's a story I'd like to hear.

Harmony

Paul gives us a key to getting along with others in Romans 12:16. I particularly like the New Living Translation rendering of the verse, "Live in harmony with each other. Don't try to act important, but enjoy the company of ordinary people. And don't think you know it all!"

Paul didn't tell us to live in melody with each other. Those singing the melody line of a piece of music follow the primary tune of the composition. Like strands of a cable, their voices blend together to form a strong, uniform sound. They sing the primary notes.

The harmony adds depth to the melody. Some harmony is very tight, like a barber shop quartet, other is much looser like the sounds of Jazz. Though a dissonant harmony is difficult to perform, it adds a dimension to the piece that excites the discriminating listener.

Paul told us to live in harmony with one another. Harmony compliments the melody; it is not the same note, but a complimentary one. It is not a wrong note, just a different one. Living in harmony with one another doesn't mean we have to have the same views, preferences, and convictions. Our Creator made us unique, and our experiences give us perspective. Paul teaches us to celebrate our differences and sing our part, while we sing the same piece of music.

Whether you wait tables in a restaurant, perform brain surgery in an operating room, or preach sermons in a church, you must have people skills to succeed. Though people skills can never replace technical expertise, few people achieve their potential without knowing how to work with others.

Instead of trying to get others to agree with you, why not see if you can sing harmony to their melody. This is possible when you follow Paul's advise: "Don't try to act important, but enjoy the company of ordinary people. And don't think you know it all!"

Nothing

"What's all the fuss about?" the skeptic asked. "What are you Christians celebrating anyway?"

"Nothing," I responded, absolutely "nothing."

The angel of the Lord proclaimed: "He is not here, for He has risen, just as He said. Come, see the place where He was lying." (Matthew 28:6 NASB) There is nothing in the tomb.

"Nothing" makes the message of Christianity unique. Most world religions have a monument that enshrines their founders in marble and granite as a tribute to their lives and teachings.

Christians have no monuments with the remains of their founder. They took Him from the cross and placed Him in a borrowed tomb. Death and Hell could not keep Him. On the first Easter He burst through the ashen grip of the tomb, defeating the powers of Satan, leaving "nothing" where His cold body was!

"Nothing" gives us power. Sin had a death grip on our lives. It defeated us and caused us to die spiritually. Christ gives us power to live a productive spiritual life. The risen Lord transforms our lives because He breaks the power of sin.

"Nothing" gives us hope. They stripped Jesus of His clothes, beat Him, and placed a crown of thorns on His head. They drove spikes through His flesh onto a cross made from rugged timbers. They spit in His face and mocked His name.

They thrust a sword under his rib cage and pierced His heart. The Romans took His cold, sweaty, pale body from the cross and threw it into a cold damp tomb. This was a dark, bleak, hopeless day.

What was in the tomb Easter Sunday? "Nothing!" Blessed be the name of the Lord. "Nothing!"

Comforting Tears

I was a green pastor about to make my first grief counseling call. The lady I was supposed to visit was the daughter-in-law of a neighbor of a member of the church,... or something like that. She was in her early twenties, about my age at the time, Her husband of less than a year died the day before in a tragic automobile accident. I was still in seminary and had absolutely no training in what I was about to do,. But I was the Pastor, so off I went with my pocket New Testament in hand.

Her tears made me feel uncomfortable. I didn't know whether to just sit there silently or say something. She was paralyzed by her grief and was in no emotional condition to carry a conversation. Small talk seemed inappropriate, and I knew I would have to initiate any conversation we would have.

I knew I needed to comfort her. But how? I wanted to say something like, "Well at least your husband is in heaven," but I didn't know him or her. After about two or three-hour-long-minutes, I dove in. "Ma'am, was your husband a Christian?"

"No, he wasn't," she replied. Now what? What could I possibly say now?

Have you ever watched a young baby learn to hold a cup? That's the way I felt,. Without any ministerial dexterity I replied, "I'm sorry, I have no comforting words to give you."

At the time, I thought I was being bold when I began to give her the plan of salvation and explain to her how she needed Christ in her life. Today, as I look back on that inaugural pastoral care visit, I know I was insensitive and rude.

If I could turn back the hands of time, I would return to her side, sit quietly, and weep with her. Today, all I can do is pray that her memory isn't as good as mine.

"Jesus wept." (John 11:35 NASB)

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Mother's Day

Over the years my mother has slowly given me some souvenirs from my childhood. Baseball cards, my first books, you know, the things I left behind when I was packing to go to college. Recently she gave me back some gifts I gave to her when I was younger, things such as my senior picture and a plaster-of-Paris hand print that I made in Vacation Bible School as a kindergartner.

While thinking about Mother's Day this year, I thought about a gift I gave her as a young child. It was a piece of cardboard covered with green burlap with a candle I made out of yarn glued on the board. Above the candle I placed a poem I wrote for her. It began, "I love my Mother, better than any other . . ." Not exactly e. e. cummings or Robert Frost, but it expressed a little boy's affection to his mother.

I don't get sentimental about motherhood. I'm sorry, but in a nation where women "have the right to choose," but a baby doesn't have the "right to life" I don't equate pregnancy with virtue. Some mothers abandon their children, abuse them, or treat them as if they are a bother. It is not motherhood I honor. It is my mother. She is a godly, kind, caring, friend who suffered the pain of childbirth, endured my teenage rebellion, and watched me become a man. She fed me, changed me, sacrificed for me, and loved me. I can never repay her for what she's done. I can do little more for my mother this year than I did as a child when I wrote her a poem saying, Mom, I love you.

I've always sent Mom clippings of my published articles and copies of the books I've written, but I have an idea that she cherishes that simple poem more. It is the only piece of my writing that she hangs on her wall and probably the last memento from my childhood she'll ever return to me.

Integrity

“Then the other administrators and princes began searching for some fault in the way Daniel was handling his affairs, but they couldn't find anything to criticize. He was faithful and honest and always responsible.” (Daniel 6:4 NLT)

To a builder, integrity means strength. To an ethicist, the word means consistency. To politicians, integrity means . . . well, we won't go there. What does the word mean to you? Surely, it is more than a slogan for a campaign.

Most people have enemies. You have yours, I have mine, and Daniel had his. We never list them as references on our resumes or go out of our way to be with them. Nevertheless, we all have enemies.

If your enemies were out to get you, and did an audit of your lifestyle, could they find room to criticize you? Daniel's enemies couldn't find anything to besmirch him. Remarkable! Daniel lived his life with utmost integrity.

Daniel's enemies decided the only way they could accuse him was by setting a trap. They convinced the king to sign a law that no one could pray to anyone but the king alone. Flattered, the king gladly signed the law without thinking how it would affect his friend Daniel.

Daniel's enemies knew he would break the law before he would pray to anyone other than the God of Israel. They spied on him, and sure enough, at the appointed hour for prayer he faced Jerusalem and prayed, just like he did every day. They caught him "in the very act" of prayer and ratted him out to the king.

Why did they know he would defy the king's law? Because Daniel was a man of integrity. He was consistent and strong. Daniel didn't pray to show his integrity; he prayed because of his integrity.

Would you describe yourself as a person of integrity? Would your enemies? Would your family?

Wings of Eagles

I like the Albuquerque Zoo because you can walk through it in a couple of hours and see just about everything. We are card-carrying members of the zoo and go several times a year.

The new polar bear exhibit is wonderful. It has a glass side enabling you to see the bears underwater. The last time we were there, Jamie and I sat down next to the glass to watch the bears swim. Suddenly, a bear lunged at Jamie and took a swipe at him with his right paw. Instinctively, Jamie ran away from the attacking bear. I laughed. That wasn't a Teddy bear behind the glass, but a vicious polar bear who hadn't lost its instincts because it was in the zoo. Jamie was glad it was in a cage.

I don't like the snakes. I wish all the snakes of the world were in cages.

Now, I like the lions and tigers and bears (oh my), but my favorite part of the zoo is the bird exhibits. The golden pheasant, my favorite animal, is usually in a free flight exhibit. I asked the curator why I've not see the bird the last few times I've gone to the zoo. She told me that the pheasant was flying up to people and sitting on their lap. Several visitors complained so now she is off-exhibit. I guess the pheasant was too domesticated and needed to be locked up.

I get sad when I stand before the American bald eagle. I usually sit down on a bench in front of the eagle and try to visualize it soaring over a lake. Walking away, I shake my head and think "That is no way to treat the symbol of our freedom." Some animals just don't belong in a cage.

What about you? Are you spiritually free? "But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles . . ." (Isaiah 40:31 KJV)

Pulling Weeds

I've made both good and bad decisions in my lifetime. A recent Harris Poll revealed some things about Americans' priorities based on the ways people spend their spare time. It appears to me that Americans are making some bad decisions.

The poll showed that 14 percent of Americans enjoy spending their free time gardening while a measly 11 percent would rather go fishing. How can that be? Can you imagine Sheriff Taylor asking Oppie to go fishing and little Ron Howard replying, "Sorry Pa, I can't go today, I'd rather help Aunt Bea pull weeds?"

Gardens have their place. They are a fine location to dig for worms before going fishin', but I just can't believe that as a whole, we'd rather go work in the garden than participating in such Biblical recreation.

If you took fish out of the Bible, you'd lose a lot of the dramatic impact. I can't imagine a group of boys and girls spellbound by a story of Jonah and the huge tomato. Can you? "Follow me and I'll make you tillers of the soil" loses something in translation.

As shocking as the fishing-gardening controversy is, there was more in this poll to raise one's eyebrow. "Spending time with the family" came in fourth with 13%, well behind reading at 30%, watching television at 21%, and gardening at 14%.

Though there will always be another chance to read a book or watch T.V., we don't get a second chance with our family. Be sure to make time for your family this summer. Why not take them fishing, or if you must, go to the garden and pull a weed together.

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Classic Christians

I'd love to own a '66 Ford Mustang. Susan had one before we were married but gave it away to a friend when the car broke down. I've often wished that I'd met her a few years earlier. Who knows, she may have given it to me.

I was just a little boy in 1966 when the pony car first took the road. A teenager in our church owned one and took me for a ride. It was a red convertible; I was in love.

Today a '66 Mustang in great condition costs more than it did when it was new. Collectors consider it a classic automobile. It has enduring value.

Why is a Mustang a classic and a 1976 Vega just an old car? The difference is reliability, style, and durability.

As you get older, do you want to be a classic, or just old? The key is reliability, style, and durability.

Are you a reliable person? Can people count on you? Do you live up to your word?

Do you live life with style and splash? Are you a classy person? Have you found ways to put "zing" into your years?

How durable are you? Can you roll with the punches and bounce back when you are down?

That's the way Caleb lived, he was active and wanting to serve God even in his old age. The fourteenth chapter of the book of Joshua records Caleb's zeal even though he was eighty years old:

"As yet I am as strong this day as I was in the day that Moses sent me: as my strength was then, even so is my strength now, for war, both to go out, and to come in. Now therefore give me this mountain. . ." Joshua 14:11-12

Don't grow old -- become a classic individual. Learn to put life into your years as God blesses you with years to your life.

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God's Voice

“Moreover, the sound of the wings of the cherubim was heard as far as the outer court, like the voice of God Almighty when He speaks.” (Ezekiel 10:5 NASB)

In most relationships, formality erodes as familiarity grows. Recently, I called to pre-certify a hospital stay with our insurance company. The agent asked me for my doctor's name., I replied, “Dr. Pinon.”

“And what is his first name?” the voice on the other end of the line asked. I stopped, stumped. I didn't know. We're not exactly on a first name basis. He's never been to my home, and I've never been to his. Our relationship is a very formal, doctor-patient relationship with defined boundaries. Out of respect, I always use his title when I talk to him.

At Sul Ross University, students call my brother Dr. Wilson. He is a professor of early childhood development and a well-respected expert in his field. He travels all over south Texas leading seminars for public school teachers. I never call him by his title. To me, he is Tim. He is my brother, not my professor.

A few weeks ago a room full of people called me Jimmy. No one ever calls me that anymore. To people in the church, I'm Pastor Jim. To those outside the church, I'm Dr. Wilson. Friends and family call me Jim, but no one calls me Jimmy anymore. Where was I? I was at my 20th High School Reunion. Those in the room remember me as an awkward teenager developing my identity. During that journey from childhood to adulthood, they called me Jimmy. That is who I'll always be to them.

There is one relationship where formality and familiarity blend. The more we pray to “Our Father who art in Heaven,” the more familiar we become with His voice. There is an awesome sense of the holiness of God that accompanies our prayers. We know we are approaching the Creator of all things with our petitions. Yet the more we pray, the easier it is for us to distinguish His voice from other silent impulses.

What does the voice of God sound like? It sounds exactly like what it did the last time you spoke to Him.

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Quiet, Please!

"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, [20] teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:19-20 NASB)

"Would you please be quiet?!" I know I shouldn't, but I usually yell this question. It never comes out in a normal tone of voice. Parenting experts say you should whisper that question, not yell it. Asking my kids to play the "quiet game" never works in our home. Usually, I use a forceful voice to quiet my children when they are too loud.

People are usually quieted by force. The judge pounds the gavel on her bench and calls the court to order. A police officer blows his whistle and draws his night stick to confront a rowdy crowd.

Noise can be formidable to overcome. The visiting team in Mile High Stadium has more than the Denver Broncos to contend with. The crowd is so noisy the offensive line can't hear the quarterback's signals. One weapon the government used during the Waco standoff was to pipe loud music toward the Branch Davidian compound at night. Have you ever been in a place that was so noisy that you couldn't hear yourself think?

What does it take to make you be quiet? They threw Peter and John in prison and threatened them with further harm, but they wouldn't be quiet. They stoned Paul, but he continued to preach the gospel. John the Baptist wouldn't be quiet until they cut off his head.

There are some places in the world where "the enemy" goes to extremes to silence Christians. Recently, communist authorities in North Vietnam poured boiling water down a Hmong believer's throat.

"Would you please NOT be quiet?" Are you spreading the gospel, or are you playing the "quiet game?"

Take a moment to pray for those you know who need to hear the gospel and say a prayer for the persecuted church.

Advanced Reservations Required

I was shocked by the news that “Flo-Jo,” Florence Griffith Joyner, died of a heart seizure on September 21, 1998 at the age of 38. Just ten years earlier she won gold medals in the 100 and 200 meter race and in the 4x100 meter relay at the 1988 Olympic Games in Seoul, Korea. How can an Olympic athlete die at such a young age with a disease that is associated with a sedentary lifestyle? I don’t know. I only know we will all die someday.

As a pastor, it is much easier for me to conduct the funeral of who's lived a long, full life. Those services are usually a mixture of sadness that we’ve lost loved ones, and happiness that they’ve gone on to their reward.

Conducting funerals for babies is the hardest task I face. Last year I conducted a funeral for a baby who died from suffocation. The father laid the baby down on a water bed for a nap. The child rolled over in his sleep and was trapped between the mattress and the side of the bed. I couldn’t make it through the service without breaking down. The pain was overwhelming.

Unfortunately, we are old enough to die from the moment we are born. Unless Jesus returns in our lifetime, none of us will escape death. The Scripture says, “And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment.” (Hebrews 9:27)

Life is fragile and precious.

Eternal life in Heaven is a promise Jesus made to His believers. It is available, without cost, but advanced reservations are required.

Spiritual Alignment

Years ago we made an investment that's really paid off for us. No, we didn't buy IBM stock when it was cheap. We bought a lifetime alignment contract for my pickup. One hundred and sixty thousand miles later, it seems like a pretty good investment.

Since the alignment is free, I try to get it done at least once a year, usually after our annual trek to the mountains of Colorado. Between city speed bumps and rocks jutting out of the mountain roads, realignment is pretty important.

When a car's front end isn't properly aligned, tires wear out faster, fuel efficiency drops, and your ride is less comfortable. Occasionally, our souls need to be realigned.

You realign your soul every time you ask "what would Jesus do." Jesus Christ is our Savior and the Lord of our life. His death paid the penalty for our sin, while his life is our guide for living. Instead of doing what comes natural, we need to do what comes "spiritual."

When you listen to the teaching and preaching of the Word, you are realigning your soul. Our faith is not automatic. It grows out of hearing of the Word of God. We allow God to realign our souls every time we explore His will for our life as outlined in the Bible.

Prayer is another way we realign our souls. Have you learned to pray: "Thy will be done?" It is an active submission of our will to God's.

As important as it is to keep your car's front end aligned to keep it running at peak performance, it is more important to keep your soul properly aligned. It is easy enough to go buy a new set of tires if we don't take care of our car, but it is not that easy to repair the damage we do to ourselves and others through spiritual neglect.

Why not make an appointment with God to check your soul alignment? Block off thirty minutes this week and ask God to give you a spiritual check up. That's exactly what David did when he prayed: "Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts" (Psalm 139:23)

Accountability

King David was a man of contradictions. He was a hard working man who was equally comfortable playing a musical instrument or fighting in a war. He was a tender-hearted poet, with musical talents that could soothe the souls of his listeners. He was a “man after God’s own heart”-- a spiritual man.

Don’t think that David was a softie. He was a warrior without peer. The people said of him: “Saul has killed his thousands, but David his ten thousands.” Even the smallest child in a Sunday School class can tell the story of David defeating Goliath.

David was a strong man, a leader of men, a man that anyone would feel safe walking beside. David was a spiritual man who penned many beautiful psalms that were sung in his day and read in our day. Yet, David had a severe moral lapse.

It was the time of year when kings lead their troops to war, but David was no where to be found. Instead of assuming his place in front of his troops, he stayed at the palace. One night while walking around the palace roof, he spotted a beautiful woman taking a bath. Instead of turning his head and walking away, he stayed and watched.

Later, he sent for her and consummated his sin with her in the palace. She became pregnant. He tried to cover it up, even resorting to murder, but to no avail.

His sin began when he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Why wasn’t he at work where he belonged? Why didn’t he run when he was tempted? Why didn’t he show self control and remain righteous.

David’s sin became a defining moment in his life. It is too bad that he didn’t finish as strong as he started. He could defeat countless Philistines in battle, but was overcome by the seduction of a single woman.

What safe guards are to taking to assure that you remain faithful to God? Are you accountable to anyone? What are you doing to make sure you are not in the wrong place at the wrong time?