

# Journey to Surrender

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Not Giving Up on Giving Up

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# Preface

I am not an author.

That is probably not a great way to start a book, but it is true. Years ago, I was invited to preach at my church. After delivering my sermon, one of the elders approached me and said, “Greg, thank you for preaching today ... I think you should probably focus your efforts on writing.”

Now years removed from this, I can laugh at this interaction, but more than seeing it as a moment of levity (or perhaps mockery), I realize it is through the encouragement of friends (particularly the elders at my church) I have continued to write. The book you are reading is the result of the words of honesty from this friend and others, as well as their encouragement.

I would like to thank everyone who read early drafts, gave me valuable feedback, and encouraged me to publish this book. I would especially like to thank George Watts, who spent much time editing and creating a cover for this book. I would also like to thank my pastor Rob Berreth, who has given me much instruction and gentle correction in my walk with Jesus. As well, I would like to thank the elders of Redeemer Church in Bellingham Washington who walked with me over many years, including Ethan Potts, Jeff DeRuyter, Dane Burgess

and Pete Carlson. Their friendship and discipleship have meant so very much to me.

Most of all, I would like to thank my wife Stephanie who has modeled for me what surrender looks like, and who encouraged me to write this book. Thank you also to my children Ella, Piper and Biniyam, who I love deeply and who bring me joy each and every day. Finally thank you to my parents who have supported and loved me with immense generosity for the past 48 years.

God laid the theme of surrender on my heart in April 2015 at a missions retreat in Kenya. I am grateful for the missionaries who shared very personal stories from their lives during this conference. The seed for this book was planted during those messages and conversations.

“The greatness of the man’s power is the measure of his surrender.”

William Booth

# Chapter One

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## Why I Wrote This

“**Y**ou are kidding me, right?” I ask with as much indignation as I am capable of. The woman behind the airline counter tells me she is sorry (although she does not really look very sorry). My family and I have just arrived at Sea-Tac airport on our way to Burundi where we will serve at a rural mission hospital for the next nine months. The first step is simply Seattle to Chicago, and apparently there is bad weather in Chicago. She informs me she can re-book us for Friday. In two days.

“Friday!” I reply with rising exasperation, “Friday? We cannot wait until Friday! Look behind me!” I say, pointing to my wife, three children, 10 plastic bins each weighing EXACTLY 50 pounds, and 5 carry-ons. I point as if I am followed by a caravan of nomads who has just completed a 6-month traverse over scorching desert (in fact, our hometown of Bellingham is only 2 hours by car, a bit over 14 hours by camel).

This is the beginning of a journey that was preceded by more than two years of planning and preparation. This is merely step 1 - get your family and your luggage on the plane to Chicago. I knew there would be hiccups travelling to Africa, but I did not expect boarding our first

plane in Seattle to be one of those hiccups. I explained to her we were traveling all the way to Burundi, a small country in East Africa, next to Rwanda. I explained to her we would not be waiting until Friday. I explained to her she *must* find another flight for us *today*. All the while, I can hear my wife behind me reminding herself, “What do we know about God? We know He is in control. What do we know about God? We know He is good.” And so, I am at a crossroads. Am I going to trust God’s plan is better than mine and ultimately He is in control? Am I going to trust in His goodness and His provision and surrender to Him?

I am not.

I am going to fight for control over this situation, even if it means my family misses the flight because I end up in jail for assaulting the woman at the airline check-in counter. (spoiler alert: I did not)

I write this book not because I am an expert at surrendering, but because I have failed to surrender time and time again. I know I can’t be alone in this, our culture really does not like the idea of surrender. We are told to be strong, to take control, to fight. You will find few books on self-help shelves recommending you surrender your life to anything. You will be hard-pressed to find a presidential candidate running on a platform of “let’s just surrender.”

Surrender

/sə'ɪɛndəɪ/verb [transitive]. To give up (something) out of one’s own possession or power into that of another who has or asserts a claim to it.<sup>1</sup>

To surrender is to move from a position of humility and submit to a force more powerful than yourself. To surrender means to allow yourself to be holistically, completely, utterly dependent upon another.

Here’s a social experiment to explore how our culture responds to the notion of surrender: the next time you are at your child’s soccer,

football or baseball game, while the other parents are cheering and rooting, just start yelling at your child “give up!”, “quit”, “you can’t win!” My suspicion is that you would not be invited to coach next year’s team.

## **A Day in the Operating Room**

By profession, I am an anesthesiologist, I put people to sleep on operating tables as my day job. In all my years of training and practice, I cannot recall ever hearing the use of the word “surrender” in my profession. All my years of training as an anesthesiologist have taught me to avoid situations such as dropping heart rates and low oxygen levels, to be prepared to treat complications, to act and to act quickly. In fact, the field of anesthesia is focused on patient safety and risk management. We do not surrender, we act.

I remember watching the movie “The Croods” with my kids about a family of cavemen. In it, the father struggles to control his teenage daughter, who desperately wants to explore the world outside. His family motto is “always be afraid, never not be afraid.” For some odd reason, this line keeps popping into my head at work when I sense something bad about to happen. Anesthesiologists are in some ways taught to “always be afraid ... never not be afraid”.

So, the idea of surrender is about as far removed from my profession as one could imagine. The emphasis on risk management, disaster preparedness and proactivity has spilled over into my non-professional life. I don’t know if I went into anesthesiology because that is my natural bent, or if my training has steered me toward these tendencies, but my whole life centers around planning, saving, security and safety. Surrender does NOT come naturally to me.

So why write a book on surrender?

The seed for this idea was planted in me during that initial 9-month term in Burundi while we were at a retreat in Kenya . Our mission sending organization put together a retreat over five days, with a focus on surrender, suffering, loss, resurrection (the final day happened to be Easter Sunday). The second day we spent time listening to a speaker talk about what it means to surrender, then we took time alone with God, praying and listening. After, we gathered into small groups to discuss what God had been stirring in us regarding surrender.

There I was, surrounded by missionaries, many of whom had spent years in very hard places. These are men and women who had sacrificed in massive ways, many of them with stories of suffering that would bring you to tears in a heartbeat.

“So, Greg, tell us about how God has used suffering in your life.”

“Well, the air conditioning in our room is broken ... so I didn’t sleep very well last night,” .... *crickets*.

Okay, so I have trouble opening up to people I just met.

In fact, I often have trouble opening up to people I have known my whole life! This is likely a failure to surrender, feeling afraid to be judged, avoiding vulnerability, believing I must “keep it together” to be accepted. Not being willing to surrender my need for approval by others.

But after listening to these men and women share stories that were so personal to them, God moved me to open up and share something more than a busted AC unit.

## **The Darkest Hour**

It had been 5 years prior. My wife and I had spent the day hiking while my parents watched our children. When we returned, my parents told us our 4-year-old daughter, Ella, had not been feeling well,

complaining of abdominal pain and had a fever. She had, in fact, been complaining on and off of some mild belly pain for the past couple of weeks, but it always seemed to get better after we let her watch some TV. So, we did not think much about it. But today she felt worse. I pressed on her belly and thought the right side felt a little tense. My first thought was appendicitis, so we took her to the Emergency Room. The ER doc pressed on her belly, and he agreed with me. Probably appendicitis. "Let's get an ultrasound to see." My wife returned home to check on Biniyam, our 6-month-old son who we had adopted from Ethiopia one month earlier. While they were home, I went with Ella back into the ultrasound room. The ultrasound technician looked a bit puzzled. She called in the radiologist. He looked at the images right in front of Ella and me. He pulled me into the corner of the room, where Ella could not hear him.

"She has a tumor."

Now begins my darkest hour.

I feel like I have been sucker punched, not just in the gut, but right in my soul. Tears well up in my eyes. I forget what I am supposed to ask next.

"It is big?"

"Yes, it is. I am so sorry. I have a daughter about her age. I am so sorry. She is a beautiful girl."

They wheel Ella from Ultrasound back to the ER. I try to quickly dry my eyes so Ella won't see I have been crying. I tell her I will be right back. I call Stephanie to tell her what I now know. Silence. Of course it's silence. How would a mother know what to say? My legs feel like jelly and I'm having a hard time keeping it together. Nausea, sadness, fear tackle me all at once.

The ER doctor is steady, kind, and sympathetic, but also strong and reassuring. "This looks like a Wilms tumor." Quickly I try to

remember something, anything about Wilms tumors from medical school. I remember it is a form of kidney cancer. What is the likely outcome? ... I can't remember.

"What is the prognosis" I ask him. "If it is a Wilms tumor, the prognosis is good". He quickly prints out several pages of information and hands them to me.

"I have spoken with the on-call oncologist at Seattle Children's, and they would like you to drive there tonight to have Ella admitted for further work-up."

How did this happen? How has life crashed so fast? A few hours ago, Steph and I were on a hike while our two healthy kids were with my parents. Now we're rushing to see a cancer specialist at a children's hospital. This can't be happening.

Steph arrives and I keep breaking down, trying desperately to not let Ella see how upset I am. Can I really drive two hours in this condition?

I must, so I do.

The next 36 hours are a tornado of emotion, information, data, people, and feelings. The pediatric oncology doctor-in-training greets us in the Children's ER (it is now after midnight, so we will not be meeting the senior oncologist until tomorrow). This young man is so kind to us. He reassures us: "childhood cancer is not like adult cancer, many of these types of cancer are very treatable." This data does nothing to keep me from crying anyway. The next day, Ella has a CT scan of her chest and abdomen. The wait for these results seems to be even more excruciating than the previous day. A few hours later, our friendly young doctor comes into our room. "Has anyone shared with you the results?" "No", I respond. "No evidence of metastasis", he tells us. "Oh, thank you God, thank you God, thank you God" I can't seem to say it enough .... thank you, God!" It hasn't spread beyond the kidney, so there are more options and better chances.

The very next day, Ella has surgery to remove not just the tumor but the entire kidney the tumor was attached to. More pain, more nausea, more tears for both Ella and me. After what feels like seven days, but is in fact only seven hours, the surgeon calls us to the conference area. The surgery has gone well. There is no evidence of metastasis or local spread. Again, thank you God. How can I ever say thank you enough?

Now all we have to do is wait for the final pathology to verify it was a Wilms tumor, then six months of chemotherapy, then five years of monitoring for recurrence. Somehow, this all seems like a piece of cake compared to the previous 36 hours. I am filled with gratitude. I am ecstatic. I do not think I have known joy like this ever in my life.

And in all this, I pray, and I beg God to spare the life of my daughter, but I also cling to statistics, to treatment options, to pathology reports and genetic markers that offer slight changes to prognosis. I tell God that I trust Him, and that I know He is in control, but all the while, I do not let go. I do not really offer my daughter to Him. I do not truly surrender.

“So, how did God change you through that experience?”

Five years later, as I sit in this circle of people on the Kenyan coast, it occurs to me – for the very first time- that even in my darkest hour, I did not truly surrender.

This realization hits me like a ton of bricks.

The weight of conviction bears down upon me.

“The truth is, I did not surrender to Him even in that moment.” I confess.

God still has so much work to do in me. I repent before this group of men and women I have known for only two days with tears in my eyes. I repent to God. I ask Him for forgiveness. I ask Him to teach me how to surrender.

## The Good News and The Bad News

As I have considered the theme of surrender, it seemed prudent to first go to my Bible to read what God has to say about this. A search in the index of my ESV (English Standard Version) Bible has not one mention of the word “surrender.” Hmm.. must be a translation issue. Next, I open my Strong’s Bible Concordance. Another strike out.

So, why did I think this was so important, if it is not even mentioned in the Bible? Certainly, I hear Christians speak often of “*surrendering* this over to the Lord,” or “that was the point I *surrendered* my life to the Lord.” Christian musicians sing about this all the time. It is part of our vocabulary, part of our lingo. So, it must be important ... right?

Although the word “surrender” may not be in your Bible (well, at least it’s not in mine), the concept is there as clear as can be. Much like *the Trinity* (another word not found in the Bible), the concept is in fact deeply important for us to understand even if the word itself is not found there.

“Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will but what you will.” Mark 14:36.

These are the words spoken by Jesus in *his* darkest hour. Jesus understands He is about to drink from the cup of God’s wrath to make atonement for the sin and rebellion of all who would trust in Him. And it will be painful. In fact, it will be the greatest pain ever experienced, as He is not only physically tortured but also abandoned by His perfect and loving Father, who must turn His face away from His beloved Son, as He takes upon Himself the sins of the world. And what does Jesus do? He surrenders. He surrenders Himself in total and complete submission to the will of God. Jesus surrendered to the will of God the Father. And now, when I fail to surrender, I can

remind myself that even though I still struggle to surrender, Jesus did so perfectly in my place.

There is something of the idea of surrender in certain other similar words used in the Bible, words like sacrifice or submit. It seems to me that the Bible has much to say about the idea of sacrifice, and although certainly surrender will involve on some level the act of sacrificing (e.g., sacrificing autonomy, pleasure, money), sacrifice seems to relate more unilaterally to what YOU are called to give up, whereas surrender involves a change in the relation between two parties.

The word *submit* probably brings us closer to the concept of surrender and certainly includes the relational aspect. God declares through the Psalmist, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt. Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it. But my people did not listen to my voice; Israel would not submit to me." (Psalm 81:11). In the New Testament James calls us to "Submit yourselves therefore to God ... Draw near to God and he will draw near to you ... Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you." (James 4:7-10). Here we see the significance of the relation between man and God. We do not rule over God. We are not even called to relate to Him as a partner or an equal. We are called to humble ourselves, to submit, to surrender to Him.

"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Matthew 16:24).

Jesus surrendered to the perfect will of The Father to secure our redemption once and for all, and He now commands His disciples to deny themselves and take up their cross and to follow Him. Why write a book about surrender? Because Jesus has now called anyone who would be His disciple to surrender themselves to Him. The call to deny yourself and follow Him is the very call upon each of us to

surrender ourselves to Him. If this is what Christ has called us to, we must figure out what that actually means.

So how does one come to a position of surrender? There are two prerequisites for surrender. You must know and understand yourself (this is the bad news), and you must know and understand the person or thing you are going to surrender to (this is the good news .... if you surrender to the right thing).

So why have I written a (small) book on Surrender? Because I think it is something that is biblically grounded and essential to deepening in our relationship with God. Also, because I recognize how many times I have resisted this posture toward God and how this has ultimately distanced me from Him and His will for my life.

### **Questions for reflection:**

1. Recall a time in your life when you had to choose between fighting for control over a situation or surrendering control to God. How did you respond to that choice?
2. During hard times do you find yourself talking to God more or less than usual? In what ways do you struggle to trust in His control and providence?
3. Wherever you live, what are the cultural attitudes toward *surrender*, both within the church and outside of it?

# Chapter Two

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## The Posture of Humility

Don't accept your dog's admiration  
as conclusive evidence that you are wonderful.

Ann Landers

The vast majority of Americans think much too highly of themselves. (At least, this is true of me). It occurs to me that this may not be a popular statement. We are inundated daily with words of affirmation that encourage this thinking. “You deserve better”, “You are a good person”, “He is lucky to have you”. We hear it from our friends, our family, our co-workers, advertisements, and self-help books.

We are told we're basically good people, with a smattering of bad people thrown in the mix, but overall, we're good. If you were to ask most people if they believe in some kind of heaven, they will say yes. If you ask them if they think they will end up there, again, yes. If you then ask them *why* they assume they will go there, the answer will probably be “*basically I'm a good person.*” The real question is then,

how good do you have to be? What if I only lied to my kids, but it was for their own good? What if I didn't go back when the cashier forgot to charge me for the milk? What if I only illegally copied software from Microsoft, but Bill Gates is so rich he doesn't even notice or care? What if I just stole one pack of gum as a kid? Or what if I only committed adultery once? What if I killed a person one time, but I felt pretty guilty about it? Where is the cut-off?

The Bible's answer to this is clear, "None is righteous, no, not one" (Romans 3:10.) If you believe that scripture is the inspired word of God, you must accept this is indeed a true assessment of our standing before God. Not one of us is righteous. Not one of us is good enough to stand before God in His heavenly kingdom. The more we understand this, the more we will be driven into a posture of humility (which, as we will see later, is in fact a wonderful place to be).

Humility is a bit of a fascination for me and something I often notice when I meet someone. Obviously, humility is a spectrum, but there are many people who fall to one of the extremes of that spectrum. Likely for most of us, it is the most obviously humble people, who seem to us the most attractive. Whereas the proudest, we find the most repulsive. C.S. Lewis says of pride, "There is no fault which makes a man more unpopular, and no fault which we are more unconscious of in ourselves. And the more we have it ourselves, the more we dislike it in others."<sup>2</sup>

I have often heard people describe me as "humble" and to be honest, I was proud of that (ironic, I know). However, as I have grown older and wiser (yep, more pride), I have realized that mine has been a false humility. Although I have learned to portray myself as humble, deep down, I am ridiculously self-centered. You only have to enter into my head to understand what I mean (or you could ask my wife). My thoughts revolve around myself, my reputation, my happiness, my joy.

When asked to do something for someone else, I may wear a smile, but in my heart, I am complaining, and often complaining bitterly. I am not a humble person.

“For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” Jesus (Luke 14:11).

Surrender to God (or anyone else) is not possible without a posture of humility. Humility in scripture is a massively important theme. It is so important because without humility, we will never allow ourselves to be submitted to the “Lordship” of Jesus Christ (we will talk about this more in the next chapter). But it is also important because scripture exhorts us to this posture for a reason, and that reason is the humility of Jesus.

“Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, *he HUMBLED himself*, becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” (Philippians 2:3-8, emphasis added).

The gospel has been described as a multi-faceted jewel, and the above verses from Philippians reflect this beautiful and precious gem that is the Gospel, the good news of Christ’s sacrificial and substitutionary atonement for our fallenness, our sinfulness, and our rebellion against our holy and perfect God. Without this atonement, this sin and rebellion condemns us to eternal hell, eternal separation from the face of God.

Jesus Christ took on a posture of humility to save you and me. He sacrificed in a deeply painful way, giving up His royal seat next to His

Father in heaven, and assuming a seat on a dirt floor next to sinners and tax collectors. This should move us to a posture of humility. This should move us to surrender to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Pastor Roy Ortland explained this impact of humility on our relationship with God. "If you would like to experience God with humility, here is how you can. You look at the cross. You see, a wise man hanging there, dying in the place of fools like you, because he loves you. You may despise him, but he does not despise you. You may be above him, but he humbled himself for you. Look there at him. Look away from yourself. Look at him and keep looking until your pride melts. You will not only worship, you will begin to grow wise."<sup>3</sup>

Pride is something that dwells in all our hearts. Although we may wear the appearance of humility, we all have pockets of pride lurking under the surface. C. J. Mahaney in his excellent book on humility wrote, "The real issue is not if pride exists in your heart; it's where pride exists and how pride is being expressed in your life."<sup>4</sup> We should never cease to examine our hearts, searching out where we may struggle with pride. Often, the things we are prideful of may seem benign, or even things we think we *should* be proud of, such as parenting or discipling other Christians. These are often the most dangerous kinds of pride because we are blind to the attitude of our hearts, which is slowly but surely causing us to drift away from God.

Pride separates us from God. You cannot know God until you have humbled yourself.

In his classic book Andrew Murray claimed, "Pride takes innumerable forms but has only one end: self-glorification."<sup>5</sup> Here lies the problem. For what end were we created? For whose glory are we to live? Much of our culture implores us to live for our own glory. There is a faint whisper in our ears promising us joy and happiness, if only we can convince people we deserve their admiration. But this is not the

end for which we were created. This is a lie, perhaps the most damaging lie ever whispered into our ears. Because this was the lie whispered into Eve's ear in the garden. This was the lie which led to her separation from God, and ever since that day, this is the lie which continues like a cancer.

This lie, which leads us to seek our own glory, will continue until Christ returns. So, we need to be on guard. We need to search our hearts every day, and to invite those closest to us to speak into our lives, to battle against this tendency. No one is immune from this disease.

The Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy, his young pastor friend, "Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work" (2 Timothy 2:21).

You are God's vessel. You are His cup. Imagine a cup that is full. Let us say it's full of something that's not even drinkable like salt water. Now let's say you want to drink out of it. You cannot just add coffee or tea or juice to the sea water, the cup must first be emptied, and it must be washed. If we truly want God to use us for His purpose, for the purpose He has created us for, we must first be emptied. We must be emptied of our wants and desires and ambitions, so that we might become empty vessels. We must be emptied of our pride. And this process of emptying may be painful. You cannot say, "I want to hold on to this salt water, just add juice" or "I'll empty of some of it, but I'd like to just leave a bit inside". No, you must be emptied and cleansed so the Master can use you for honorable use, for the purpose He intends. Again, Andrew Murray says about praying with pride, "people want, when they are in perplexity, to pray earnestly so that God would answer them at once. But God can only reveal His will to a heart that is humble and tender and empty."<sup>6</sup> This is what it means to assume a posture of humility. It means to cultivate a heart

that is tender and empty, so that God might fill that heart according to His will. Murray concludes, “If I am something, then God is not everything; but when I become nothing, God can become all.”<sup>7</sup>

Let us learn to become nothing, so that God can become all.

### **Questions for reflection:**

1. Do you consider yourself to be a humble person? Why or why not?
2. In your line of work, or however you spend your days, is humility considered an asset or a liability?
3. When you honestly look into your heart, what specific areas of pride have taken root? What do you remain proud of: your reputation, intelligence, ability to do your job, how well you parent, what a good friend / Christian / neighbor you are? Is there some characteristic that you're proud of – how honest, hard-working, loyal or (ironically) humble you are?

# Chapter Three

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## Lordship

God's lordship confronts and opposes autonomy from the outset. It demands our recognition that all things belong to him and are subject to his control and authority.

John M. Frame<sup>1</sup>

Most of us have become so familiar with the word “Lord” that its massive significance seems to almost wash past us daily. First we need to recognize LORD (in all capitals) is Bible translators attempt to represent God's proper name *YAHWEH* which happens almost 7,000 times. This is not actually a translation of a word meaning ‘lord’, but a way of writing *YAHWEH*, which the people of Israel consider too holy to write down. The rest of the time (about 600 times in New Testament, 600 in the Old) ‘lord’ is a translation of a word similar to *master*—like Lords and Ladies in old English. *Kyrios* (κύριος) is the Greek word for *master* or *lord* used in the New Testament. In the Old Testament the Hebrew word for *master* or *lord* is *Adonai*—which has the same root as the Hebrew words for ‘sovereign’ and ‘power.’ ‘Lord’ is the title used for God, and significantly for Jesus as well. A lord is one who has control, authority, and power over

others, so we can imagine that when one places the article “the” before “Lord”, you have an implication of superiority far above all others. The superiority of God as Lord OVER us has enormous implications, that cannot and should not be glossed over. When we hear God referred to as *Lord of Lords*, it should seem very similar to the phrase *King of Kings*.

We live in a culture where we are the Lord of our lives. I believe this is true for both Christians and non-Christians. We firmly believe the world revolves around us. When problems arise, we are the victims. When success comes, we are the victor. The driving purpose behind our thoughts and actions is the pursuit of our own happiness. When we are having a conversation with someone, our thoughts revolve around ourselves, and we are constantly merely writing that person into our own story (either audibly or silently). Our default paradigm is one where we are the center.

What most of us (myself included) need to truly live under the Lordship of Jesus Christ is a shifting in our paradigm. We need to recognize what are our underlying assumptions, our preconceptions, our self-centered thought patterns, and step outside of ourselves. This is not an easy step to take, but it is essential to understanding the story which we are a part of and essential to understanding we are not the true author of that story.

## **Paradigm Shifting**

In his book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey talks about the importance of “paradigm shifting.” A paradigm is a set of underlying assumptions and preconceptions that a person holds that affects their perspective of and reaction to the world around them. “The term paradigm shift was introduced by Thomas Kuhn

in his highly influential landmark book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Kuhn shows how almost every significant breakthrough in the field of scientific endeavor is first a break with tradition, with old ways of thinking, with old paradigms.”<sup>9</sup> Mr. Covey asserts that to truly be “effective” in our relationships with other people or groups of people, we need to recognize what is our own paradigm and then to understand the paradigm of the “other.” “Our paradigms, correct or incorrect, are the sources of our attitudes and behaviors, and ultimately our relationships with others.”<sup>10</sup>

I remember when I was actively trying to help people through a significant paradigm shift. For several years, I served as an elder in our local church where one of my roles was pre-marital counselor. When I told a family member I was involved in this work, they said to me, “oh, it doesn’t matter what you say to these couples because they won’t remember anything of it after they are married.” I thought about this for a while. I thought back to my pre-marital counseling and realized I could remember almost nothing of those sessions. They were right, almost nothing I said would be retained. So, I decided I needed *one* theme that I would hammer into them at every session, hoping maybe if I focused my attention on one point, that they *would* remember. Before taking on this role, I spent considerable time reflecting on what I thought would be the single most important message I could give to a couple preparing for marriage. After searching the Bible, reading Christian books on marriage, and examining my own marriage, and those around me, the single point I came to was *humility*.

As I looked at marriages I knew that had ended in divorce (or were at least heading in that direction) I saw a pattern. One, or sometimes both, of the spouses felt they deserved better. They had entered into marriage with the mindset or “paradigm” that marriage would increase *their* happiness, *their* health, and sometimes *their* wealth. But

that is not what we are called to in marriage. We are called to be servants. We are called to sacrifice ourselves for the happiness, health and wealth of our spouse. We are called to be committed to the growth and sanctification of the “other”. We are called to surrender and, in a sense, to die to ourselves. This is a huge paradigm shift for most of our marriages. As I counseled these young couples, I would read Philippians chapter 2 at every session. I would read this reflection of the gospel, that of humility and sacrificial servanthood at their weddings. More than anything I desperately tried to shift their paradigm of marriage. I wanted them to see what it would mean for them to shift from a self-centered pursuit of their own happiness to an other-centered pursuit for the happiness of their spouse.

## **Your paradigm**

So, what is your paradigm? In what areas of your life are you fixated on your autonomy, your happiness, your glory? What is your ultimate goal in life? What is it that gets you up and out of bed every morning? For whose glory are you laboring? Are you willing to sacrifice glory that is temporary and fading for glory that is eternal and unfading, the glory that comes not from yourself but from another? Many of us who call ourselves Christians may answer that question with a resounding “yes”. However, when our lives are examined, we will probably see a different reality. Where are we investing our time, our money, our gifts, even our thoughts? Can we say with confidence that we have committed every aspect of our lives to that which is eternal and unfading? Or are we living for our next vacation, a comfortable retirement, or the next new toy?

At the start of this chapter, I quoted from John M. Frame’s, *Systematic Theology*. But there is more to that quote: “The main problem

is that we live in a world obsessed by autonomy. As with Adam and Eve in the garden, people today do not want to bow the knee to someone other than themselves. God's Lordship confronts and opposes autonomy from the outset. It demands our recognition that all things belong to him and are subject to his control and authority. That demand is unacceptable to people who are outside of Christ, and to some extent even believers chafe when the demand is made clearly."<sup>11</sup>

*This* is the paradigm we live under. We desperately need to examine our lives and ask ourselves, who or what is truly Lord over our lives? Perhaps now we can recognize some of the underlying assumptions which form the basis for our paradigm. Now it is time to shift.

## **Something You Stand Under**

Pastor Tim Keller said, "Real truth will always move you from something that you understand, to something you stand under."<sup>12</sup> The more deeply we grasp the truth of who Jesus is and what He has done for us, the more we will arrange our lives in a way in which we are standing under His Lordship. But why should we submit ourselves to the control and authority of Jesus Christ? Why not keep living like we have been, under our own authority, under our own effort and control? For me, the shortest answer to that question can be found in one word. Worthy.

We should submit ourselves to His Lordship because He alone is worthy.

"Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created." Revelation 4:11

The more you understand who God is (His attributes) and what He has done (His story of creation, redemption, restoration), the more

this reality will “move you from something that you understand, to something you stand under”. We cannot come to understand the worthiness of God apart from the study of His story all the way from Genesis to Revelation. Even if we take only one attribute of God, as described in the Bible, we can understand a lot about the worthiness of God.

## **The Holiness of God**

“...Thus says the Lord GOD: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. And I will vindicate the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them. And the nations will know that I am the LORD, declares the Lord GOD, when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes. I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.”  
Ezekiel 36:22-27 (ESV)

What does the word “holy” mean to you? Before you read any further, take a minute and think about what it means to you that God is holy. We desperately need a proper understanding of God’s holiness. Our understanding of this will determine how we pray, how we worship, and how we walk with Him. It will determine our very

identity. Without a proper understanding of God's holiness, we are left with a shallow faith.

It has been said that God's holiness means that He is completely separate from sin. This is true, but this only tells us what holiness is not. Holiness is the opposite of sinfulness. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines holiness as "exalted or worthy of complete devotion as one perfect in goodness and righteousness". That is our God! He is *worthy* of complete devotion. He is *perfect* in goodness and righteousness. He is to be *exalted*, above all else!

Often, when I remember growing up in the Roman Catholic Church, it seems to me, that there they had a great awareness of God's holiness. Our voices would be hushed as we entered. Our heads would be bowed. We would lower ourselves on bended knee as we prayed to our Most Holy God. Since I left the Catholic Church, I have been back to visit occasionally, and am always struck by the reverence for His Holiness that I sense. I do thank God for that experience of His Holiness in my youth.

In his book, The Holiness Of God , R. C. Sproul notes the importance of the sequence of the prayer Jesus taught us. He writes, "There is a kind of sequence within the prayer. God's kingdom will never come where His name is not considered holy. His will is not done on earth as it is in heaven if His name is desecrated here. In heaven, the name of God is holy. It is breathed by angels in a sacred hush. Heaven is a place where reverence for God is total. It is foolish to look for the kingdom anywhere God is not revered."<sup>13</sup>

We are people who have not revered God. We are a people who have profaned His holy name, and yet, God in His great mercy, gives us a new heart, and a new spirit. A spirit that enables us to care about His holiness and live in a way that glorifies Him. He does this because He loves us, but even more, He does this because He desires to see His

holy name glorified. It is not for our sake that He acts, but for the sake of His holiness. We must not ignore this point that God desires and deserves, above all else, to be glorified. And this is right and good because He alone is *worthy* to be glorified. It is not until we live in light of His holiness that we will be complete. It is then we will live as we were created, for the purpose we were created. It is only then we will experience the Shalom we all long for so deeply. Let us spend the rest of our earthly lives seeking an awareness of God's holiness. Let us give glory to our Most Holy God. Today, let us "be still, and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10). So that some day when we see what John envisioned in Revelation, we will be somewhat prepared: "And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within, and day and night they never cease to say, 'Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!'" (Revelation 4:8)

Holiness is just one of God's many attributes. He is also merciful, just, eternal, sovereign, spirit, glorious, and so much more. To better understand God, we need to spend time studying and meditating on each and every attribute. It is not enough to pick and choose your favorite attribute and neglect the others. The risk in doing this is that we will end up constructing our own image of God based on who we want Him to be, rather than standing under the truth of who God tells us He is.<sup>14</sup>

## Jesus as Lord

"He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature and he upholds the universe by the word of his power."  
Hebrews 1:3

This is one of my favorite verses in the Bible. When I can quiet my mind and sit in silent meditation on who God is, these words often come to life for me. Jesus is the radiance of the glory of God. He is the *exact* imprint of His nature! If there was ever any question of Jesus' right to claim Lordship over us, these words should remove all doubt. Even now, He upholds (current tense) the universe by the word of His power. How much power is needed to uphold *all things*, not just my current situation but the entire universe? It is mind bending and should drive us to our knees as we see Jesus Christ for who He is, God made flesh.

After Jesus' resurrection, He appeared to His disciples, including Thomas. Thomas was a skeptic and could not believe Jesus had been raised from the dead without experiencing for himself the presence of the risen Lord. So, in His compassion, Jesus appears to Thomas eight days after appearing to the rest of His disciples and invites Thomas to place his hands in His wounds, so that he might believe. Thomas responds, "My Lord and my God!" Thomas now experiences the truth of who Jesus is, and he responds with a declaration of worship and of surrender to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

There is so much more that could be said about the worthiness of God to be Lord over our lives. This is the message of every page of the Bible. We could spend the rest of our lives exploring the worthiness of God, and we would never reach the end. It is my hope this is what we will do. He is worthy. The sum of His attributes testify to His worthiness.

### **Questions for reflection:**

1. In what ways do you struggle to submit to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in your life? What is one thing He has asked you

to give up that you have been holding onto?

2. If a non-believer asked you why they should submit to Jesus as Lord over their life, how would you answer them?
3. What does it mean to you that God is “holy”? If you were to be constantly aware of God’s holiness this week, what would or should change in your life?

# Chapter Four

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## Sonship and Daughtership

Having a child is like getting a tattoo ... on your face.

You better be committed.

- Eat, Love, Pray by Elizabeth Gilbert

The Lordship of God is crucial to growing our relationship with and dependence on Him, as His disciples. However, we must not forget that He is not only our Lord but also our Father, and He is committed to us. He is, in fact, the MOST committed Father in the history of the universe, to His children. The New Testament places a heavy emphasis on the concept of *sonship*, and Jesus Himself teaches us to call on God as “Our Father”. Throughout this chapter, when using the term “sonship” I will be referring to our status as children for BOTH men (boys) and women (girls). In the Bible we are not only referred to as His children, but we are told how we *became* His children. We were adopted.

“But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.” Galatians 4:5

Why did God send forth His Son? In order to adopt us as His sons and daughter!

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

Why did He adopt us? Out of love and according to His purpose and will!

That God would adopt us to be His sons and daughters is stunning. When paired with His Lordship, our adoption reveals to us that God is great and glorious (Lordship), and God is at the same time good and gracious (Sonship). We should stand in awe of the holiness and glory of God, and at the same time we are invited to speak to Him as Father. We are to cry out to Him when we are hurting, and to run to Him when we are scared. Within the concept of Sonship is an implication of dependence. We are dependent upon God to provide for and to protect us as a child is dependent on his father to meet these same essential needs. The limitation here is that, in our relationship with our earthly fathers, as we grow up and mature, our dependence diminishes. With our heavenly Father, our dependence only grows deeper. Not that the dependence itself changes at all, but our understanding of our need for Him grows as we mature.

J.I. Packer helped expand this idea of being adopted by God in his book *Knowing God*. In it he writes, “Adoption is a family idea,

conceived in terms of love, and viewing God as father. In adoption, God takes us into His family and fellowship, and establishes us as His children and heirs. Closeness, affection, and generosity are at the heart of the relationship. To be right with God, the judge is a great thing, but to be loved and cared for by God the father is greater.”<sup>15</sup>

When you think of God, what adjectives would you use to describe your relationship with Him? Would you use the words closeness, affection, and generosity? Do you feel loved and cared for by God the Father? Upon honest reflection, many of us would likely respond *no*. We give God what we believe to be the “required” amount of time in prayer, in Bible study, in Sunday morning worship, and our wealth. But what about the remaining 99% of our time, and the remaining 90%+ of our money, and the vast majority of our attention?

If I said to my daughter Ella, “Ella, I am a busy guy, and I have a lot going on in my life, so I am going to give you one hour every weekend, and during that time I want to hear about your week. When that hour is ended, we will go our separate ways until next week.” Most of you would likely tell me I am a terrible father, and I would agree. You don’t get to know someone by ignoring them, but by spending time with them. Not every moment will be extraordinary, and not every moment spent with God will be an experience of ecstatic worship. Many moments will be quite ordinary, but collectively, not a second of that time will have been wasted. As your relationship grows and deepens, your affections will change, and you will grow in your understanding of what is truly important. You will see your actions change as your motivations change, and your eyes become more and more fixed on Jesus, the author and perfecter of your faith.

## **Spiritual Orphans**

Regarding God's offer of adoption we have two options: we can come to God as sons and daughters or we can continue to live as spiritual orphans. What is a spiritual orphan? Orphans tend to be anxious about their needs (relationships, money, health), they often feel condemned, or guilty. An orphan tends to be self-willed, proud when they succeed and crushed when they fail. Their identity is wrapped up in their performance or achievements. However, Jesus told us "I will not leave you as orphans." John 14:18

My wife and I have adopted two children, both from Ethiopia. We adopted our son when he was only five months old. Attachment came easily. After one or two bottles of milk and a little snuggling, he seemed to know we were his parents. Later we adopted our daughter when she was four years old. Attachment did *not* come easily. No matter how many times we told her we loved her, and we would be her parents forever, she was suspicious of us. She had been hurt before, and so, for many months, she continued to act as an orphan. She would cry and scream and tell us we did not love her. In fact, for the first several months, we felt more like kidnappers than adoptive parents. Thankfully, with consistent love and by the work of the Holy Spirit, she has now bonded to us, and knows we will not leave her. She has been transformed from an orphan to a daughter. What is interesting is that although this transformation took place instantaneously for my wife and I (the moment the Ethiopian court approved our adoption, she *was* our daughter) for her the transformation took much longer. It took months. Many months.

This contrast between sonship and orphanhood has become very tangible to my wife and me. Now as I examine my own relationship with my adopted heavenly Father, I see how often I act as a spiritual orphan. He has offered me the most precious gift in the world, the gift of God Himself as my Father, and although I told Him I accept

this adoption, I often feel alone, and anxious, and weak in my faith. Thankfully, as with the adoption of our daughter, I can be confident my status before God was declared the moment I accepted Jesus as my Savior. Although I am slow to see the transformation, in God's eyes, it is finished. I am His son; He is my loving Father. No matter how much I screw up, wander, and ignore Him, He still loves me as a son.

## **The Sacrificial Love of a Father**

Many years after my daughter's illness, I was in a Bible study with a group of Burundian physicians. We were talking about sacrificial love. I started explaining to them what I had gone through when my daughter had cancer, but as I was speaking, the Holy Spirit gave me a fresh insight into what I had experienced and what it reveals about the love of God the Father. "When my daughter had cancer, what I wished for more than anything was that I could take that cancer from her, even if it meant putting that cancer inside myself, even if it meant I would die from that cancer if only she would be healed. I now realize that we all have a cancer growing inside of us, the cancer of sin. And Jesus Christ has done exactly what I could not do. He took our cancer on Himself, and he, in fact, died from that cancer so that we might live." My voice was cracking with emotion as I understood that evening more deeply than I had ever before, the depth of the love of Jesus for me.

The Bible is clear about who we are in relation to God, we are His daughter and sons. He has gone through extraordinary lengths to adopt us. But I will confess that I often hold these two truths (He is my loving father, and He is my Lord) in tension. While many of us had loving fathers, very few of us have had fathers who were kings or lords. Therefore, earthly examples will only lead us so far. We need to step

outside once again of our paradigms and surrender our minds and our hearts to what God tells us about who He is and who we are. This will take time and effort, and while we may not fully grasp these truths in our lifetimes, I am convinced that we will grasp them when we reach our eternal home and approach His glorious throne and He embraces us with a love that is almost too wonderful to imagine.

### **Questions for reflection:**

1. What adjectives would you use to describe your relationship with God? Would you use the words closeness, affection, and generosity? Harsh, stern, loving, transactional? Would you say the relationship is steady, enabling, dysfunctional or vibrant?
2. How does your relationship with your earthly Father affect your view of God as your ultimate Father? What positives and negatives to you bring to your relationship with God because of your own childhood?
3. How is the love of a parent for their children different from other kinds of love? How is God's love for you similar or different?

# Chapter Five

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## Lessons from History

If I were two-faced, would I be wearing this one?

Abraham Lincoln

History is filled with stories of men and women who have understood the greatness that comes from surrender. These stories can be found both inside and outside of the biblical historical narrative. I would like to share a few stories of people who have modeled this posture for us to see what we can learn from them.

### **Abraham Lincoln**

*‘Abraham Lincoln was a horrible person.’*

You would be hard pressed to find a rational American today who would agree with that statement. However, that is what thousands and thousands of Americans thought of him during his time as president. While growing up, I learned about Lincoln in grade school and pic-

tured him as the great liberator for American slaves. But Lincoln has been a bit of a fascination for me recently and I have only more recently come to appreciate how deeply hated he was during his time in office.

“At Philadelphia, the presidential train was met by detectives who had uncovered evidence of an assassination plot, a plan to murder Lincoln as he traveled through Baltimore the next day. He was persuaded to switch trains and travel secretly through the night to Washington, accompanied by armed guards. When his night train passed through Baltimore at 3: 30 A.M., Lincoln was safely hidden in a sleeping berth. He arrived in Washington at dawn, unnoticed and unannounced. Word of Lincoln’s secret night ride spread fast. Opposition newspapers ridiculed the president-elect, calling his escape from Baltimore ‘the flight of Abraham.’ The abuse became nasty. Hostile editors and politicians snickered at ‘this backwoods President’ and his ‘boorish’ wife. They taunted Lincoln as a hick with a high-pitched voice and a Kentucky twang, an ugly ‘gorilla’ and ‘baboon.’”<sup>16</sup>

What was it about Lincoln that enabled him to labor for so many painful years in the position he was elected to, being verbally, and even physically attacked? Admittedly, I am not a historian, and many debate to what extent Lincoln had his mind on the abolition of slavery at the start of the Civil War compared to the restoration of the Union. However, as the war went on, the question of slavery became more and more of a focal point for both the North and the South. Somehow during this journey, Lincoln became convinced that slavery was an injustice that must be ended. “Whenever I hear anyone arguing for slavery, I feel a strong impulse to see it tried on him personally.”<sup>17</sup>

Lincoln surrendered himself to the ideal of justice as expressed in the issue of slavery. It could be argued whether Lincoln was a born-again Christian (I plan to find this out once I get to the other side). But whatever drove Lincoln in his pursuit of abolition, ulti-

mately, he had submitted himself to the ideals of justice and freedom and mercy, all of which we receive from God above.

What exactly did Lincoln surrender? First, he surrendered the admiration of half (or possibly more than half) of the country he was serving as president. It is difficult to stand up for something in the face of opposition. This is true even on small scales but imagine standing in the firing line of hundreds of thousands of people. So many of us live for the affirmation of others. It is not a bad thing to enjoy being affirmed by others, but when this desire rises above our integrity and honesty and even above our desire to see God glorified, then we have gone too far. Lincoln could easily have stood on another platform that would have made him much more popular. We don't have to search hard today to see examples of politicians who will say anything to stay in the political limelight. Yet, occasionally, someone actually stands up for what they know to be right, even if it means they will be hated or persecuted, or even assassinated. Lincoln himself said, "Avoid popularity if you would have peace."

"The president's friends were worried about his safety. They feared that rebel sympathizers would try to kidnap or kill him in a desperate attempt to save the Confederacy. Lincoln had been living with rumors of abduction and assassination ever since he was first elected. Threatening letters arrived in the mail almost every day. He filed them away in a bulging envelope marked ASSASSINATION. 'I long ago made up my mind that if anyone wants to kill me, he will do it,' he told a newspaper reporter. 'If I wore a shirt of mail, and kept myself surrounded by a bodyguard, it would be all the same. There are a thousand ways of getting at a man if it is desired that he should be killed.'"<sup>18</sup>

Abraham Lincoln was a man of integrity, who understood the weightiness of the injustice of slavery. He surrendered himself to the

higher moral ground as he understood the truth of what it meant for men and women born in the image of God to be stripped of their freedom. Lincoln chose to stand under this truth and submit to what he knew to be the path of justice, even if it meant he should die for this ideal. And that is exactly how his life ended.

## **Dietrich Bonhoeffer**

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born in 1906, into a wealthy and accomplished German family. He was extremely gifted both as a musician and as an academic, and eventually went to university to study theology. Bonhoeffer graduated seminary, working as a pastor and eventually an author. His most famous book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, has become a classic exposition on what it means to be a follower of Christ in times of turbulence and suffering.

Bonhoeffer's life became a living example of what it means to surrender, in the most extreme sense, to the authority and will of God faced with the evil of Adolph Hitler and his Nazi regime. Despite his wealth and resources, rather than running and hiding from the Nazis in the safety of another country (which he had ample opportunity to do), Bonhoeffer worked tirelessly, writing, teaching, and preaching, exhorting the German church to stand up against the atrocities being committed by the Nazis. Bonhoeffer, along with a small handful of other pastors and theologians, eventually founded the "Confessing church". The confessing church became, during this time, the true Christian church which stood boldly against the "German church" which had allowed itself to become essentially a pawn in the hands of Hitler, purging itself of all references to Judaism and eventually discarding the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, as Hitler felt that this was a sign of weakness for the Christian people. Slowly but surely,

Hitler positioned himself as the authority of and lord over the German Christian church, and Bonhoeffer refused to bend his knee to this false religion and this false god.

“Silence in the face of evil is itself evil: God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act.” - Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Although he did for periods live abroad, Bonhoeffer eventually returned to Germany, facing what he must have known would likely be the end of his earthy life, and was shortly thereafter imprisoned in Tegel military prison. On the morning of April 9, 1945, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was led, cold and naked, to the execution yard at Eberhard Bethge, a friend and student of Bonhoeffer, witnessed his execution and later wrote the following, “I saw Pastor Bonhoeffer... kneeling on the floor praying fervently to God. I was most deeply moved by the way this lovable man prayed, so devout and so certain that God heard his prayer. At the place of execution, he again said a short prayer and then climbed the few steps to the gallows, brave and composed. His death ensued after a few seconds. In the almost fifty years that I worked as a doctor, I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God.”<sup>19</sup>

Dietrich Bonhoeffer now stands as a shining example of what it means to surrender completely to God. He understood what was being done by the Nazi's as utterly offensive to God, and he was willing to lay down everything, even his life, to fight against this evil. He paid the cost of discipleship, submitting himself to the reign of Jesus Christ as Lord. A few months before his execution, Bonhoeffer wrote a poem titled “Stations on the Road to Freedom”, those stations being Discipline, Action, Suffering and Death. He understood the cost of surrendering his life to the Lordship of Jesus, and he understood as well the reward that awaited him. The last verse reads:

Death

Come now, thou greatest of feasts on the journey to freedom eternal;

death, cast aside all the burdensome chains, and demolish the walls of our temporal body, the walls of our souls that are blinded,

so that at last we may see that which here remains hidden.

Freedom, how long we have sought thee in discipline, action, and suffering;

dying, we now may behold thee revealed in the Lord.<sup>20</sup>

To learn more about his story, I commend to you the book, *Bonhoeffer, Pastor, Martyr, Prophet and Spy*, by Eric Metaxas (Thomas Nelson Publishing, 2010).

## **Ronnie Smith**

My third “historical” figure is a young man you have likely never heard of. Although I never met Ronnie, he was not famous, and we lived thousands of miles apart, he had a significant impact on my life and my faith. Back in 2010, I saw a video of a young man preach a sermon at an Acts 29 church in Texas. It was not your typical sermon but rather a sequence of 47 portions of scripture crafted together, memorized, and recited to the church by a man named Ronnie Smith. Something about watching this 28-minute video moved me deeply. I saw in what Ronnie had done, something genuinely beautiful. When you experience something you believe to be genuinely beautiful, you cannot help but share it with others. So, I committed myself to memorize this work, which Ronnie called “The History of Redemption.” I must have watched this video 50 or 60 times. And I must have talked about it so much that my pastor eventually asked me to write a weekly blog post on each of these 47 sections of scripture for our church (remember,

they were done asking me to speak). So, over the course of 2011, that is what I did. I invested countless hours in reading, listening to, memorizing, and writing, all catalyzed by what Ronnie had done. He was a young man, about my age, and I knew nothing else about him, except that he was a faithful servant of Christ who was a part of a church in Texas.

Later I learned that in December 2013, Ronnie was murdered in Benghazi, Libya. He was living there with his wife and young son, working as a chemistry teacher at the international school. He was shot dead while jogging mere days before he was to fly to the US to join his wife and son for Christmas who had left just a week before him. He was 33 years old. I believe God called Ronnie and his wife to move to Benghazi, one of the most violent and broken cities on this planet, because God loves those people. Ronnie and his wife went because they had been filled with a hope that extends into eternity and they desired to share this hope with those who have no hope. Although I never met Ronnie, and I still know very little about him, I am sure he understood the very real possibility of facing death in a place like Benghazi. Still, he went to love and to serve the people of Libya and to love and serve his God and Savior. Ronnie paid the ultimate price for his obedience to Christ, and I am confident in the moments following his death, he heard the voice of God Himself gently whispering in his ear, "well done, good and faithful servant."

Although many were saddened and grieved deeply for the loss of Ronnie, his life was not wasted. And today, be sure of this, Ronnie is not sad. I praise God for Ronnie's life as he surrendered himself to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. He lived a life of absolute direction and purpose for the glory of God. His story is a reminder that ultimately our hope is not in the number of our days or what we accomplish, but in a God who can and will use them to bring glory to Himself.

God can use all things for good for those who love him and are called according to His purpose. Ronnie's life was a testimony to his love for God, and now our prayer is that God would use his death as a catalyst for the forwarding of the Gospel and the hope to which we cling. This is a worthy cause. There is no greater cause<sup>21</sup>

God has given us examples throughout history of men and women who have surrendered their lives for the glory of God and for His purposes (goodness, justice, beauty, etc.). As we consider how we may more faithfully surrender to His Lordship over our lives, we will be forced to remember that surrender often comes with a price. But that price is far less than the worth of what will be achieved, for His kingdom and His glory and our eternal joy in His presence.

“Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints” (Psalm 116:15)

### **Questions for reflection:**

1. Who have you heard of who truly surrendered their lives to a cause greater than themselves? What do you think was their motivation for living this way?
2. Who do you know personally who has surrendered their lives to the Lordship of Jesus Christ? What is different about them compared to most?
3. At the end of your life, what do you want people to say about the purpose or cause for which you lived? (For an extended exercise in this, try writing out your own eulogy as you hope it will be spoken at your funeral)

# Chapter Six

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## Surrendering “The Good Life”

When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

**I**n the process of “signing up” to be a missionary, I was informed that within 9 months my salary would be cut by 87%. This was not easy for me to hear. Ten years prior, I had finished my years of training and started working as an anesthesiologist. As this is a lucrative field of work, I still remember the day I received my first paycheck as an. Stephanie and I stared at it for a very long time. It was a lot of money, and there was more to come, month after month. Over the next 10 years, we strived to be generous with this income. We tithed regularly to our church, we gave to missionaries in need of support, we donated to fundraisers for all sorts of causes that we felt were worthy. But even after our giving, we were left with a lot of money. We have taken some very nice vacations. We lived in a very big house. We lived what many would call “The Good Life”.

So, what has changed? In 2015 my wife and I travelled to Philadelphia to the headquarters of a mission agency to apply to serve as long-term missionaries in Burundi, where we had previously served for nine months. After two days of assessing our fitness to serve in Burundi, the agency handed us an "appointment letter," essentially a job offer for missionaries. We were happy. Then they handed us another piece of paper. It summarized the costs involved in getting to and living in Burundi, costs we would have to now go and fundraise for, among our friends and family. Our happiness now quickly waning. The cost is substantial.

Included in this summary of expenses was a monthly salary which I would receive out of the money that we would raise. In my mind, I quickly estimated the percentage this new salary would be, compared to my previous salary. I would love to say that it was a joy to sacrifice so much for the glory of my Lord, King Jesus. But it seems it may take me a while to get to the joy ... but I will get there just as soon as I get through this valley of despair.

Compounding my despair in losing 87% of my salary was the visceral negative reaction I had to the idea of having to now ask my friends and family if they would consider supporting us, each and every month for the next 5 years (or longer). This put me in a very needy position. Suddenly, it seemed I had become something of a beggar.

We hoped to be able to raise the support we needed within the next 9 months, so that we could deploy to the field. I suspected those 9 months would be transformative for me, painful and transformative. We did not doubt the call that God has placed on us. We could not deny that He had prepared a place for us in Burundi. But the question I kept asking myself was, "am I spiritually strong enough to exchange the comforts of my current life for a life that is significantly less com-

fortable, and in some ways significantly less secure". Am I ready to "come and die". Is Jesus enough for me? How desperately I wanted to answer "yes", and how fiercely my flesh cried out "no".

Suddenly, the idea of surrender had become exquisitely real for me. Yes, Christ had called us to work that He had prepared for us, and for which He had been preparing us. And now we were at a crossroads. We could run back to our wealth, and our big house, and our perceived security, or we could lay down everything and listen to His voice and follow Him. We had chosen (at least one day) to surrender to God. I prayed we would be able to surrender to Him again the next day and the day after that and the day after that. We had chosen to exchange the glory of what is seen for that which is unseen (2 Corinthians 4:18).

David Platt, in his book *Radical*, challenges American Christians to re-examine the Gospel and the commands of Jesus and to consider changing our paradigm, and therefore our lifestyle, to abandon our lives for the sake of Gospel and the glory of God. When assessing the state of the American church he says, "Fundamentally, the gospel is the revelation of who God is, who we are, and how we can be reconciled to him. Yet in the American dream, where self reigns as king (or queen), we have a dangerous tendency to misunderstand, minimize, and even manipulate the gospel in order to accommodate our assumptions and our desires. As a result, we desperately need to explore how much of our understanding of the gospel is American and how much is biblical. And in the process, we need to examine whether we have misconstrued a proper response to the gospel and maybe even missed the primary reward of the gospel, which is God himself."<sup>22</sup> May God grant us to re-discover the Gospel message and to respond in obedient faith and in surrender.

## The Monster Inside of Me

During our transition from the life of a private practice anesthesiologist to an overseas missionary, I spent a lot of time thinking about money, probably too much. I suspect this preoccupation had been triggered by the large pay cut I was about to get as we transitioned to becoming missionaries.

It came to my attention that money is very important to people (that's right captain obvious). However, it is not the money itself that I think reveals so much about us as people, but what we do with that money, why it gives us so much satisfaction, and why we spend so much energy laboring for it, and then worrying about it once we get it.

Tim Keller once asked the following question: Five people are sitting around a table drinking wine. How do you tell which one is the alcoholic? It is not the one who drinks the most wine. No, take the wine away and see which one has a meltdown. Which one becomes angry and agitated? *That* is the alcoholic.

It is the same with money. Most of us believe the lie that money will make us happy. For some of us it's what we can buy with that money, the security (or rather, the false security) that money gives us, or even the feeling of superiority that having a larger bank account than our neighbor gives us. But if you want to find out what someone's heart is truly set upon, take that money away... and watch them squirm. We saw this most tragically when the stock market crashed in 2008. One study in the British Medical Journal suggested that the money lost in this crash resulted in approximately 5,000 suicides<sup>23</sup> but the full emotional impact on many families was much more widespread. There is a monster living inside us. Most of us do not even know that he is there. But he is there, and he is eating away at our souls. Take

away what we're addicted to, and we squirm. When I saw this 87% reduction in salary, did I ever squirm.

Some might think that since I have given up the "rich doctor lifestyle" and the salary that accompanies it, I am immune to this idolatry. I am not. I have spent far too much time "counting the cost" of what we were going to do. Now, I know, in my head, that more money will not give us satisfaction in this life. I know this in my head, but yet the monster inside me continues to wage war in my heart.

Jesus talked more about money than about heaven and hell combined. He did this not because money was so important to Him, but because He understood the destructive effect it had upon us (even 2000 years ago). He talked about it because He loves us, and He wants us to release our clenched grip we have on money before it destroys us. He understood the tendency we have to let our wealth and its deceptive nature steal our affections away from Him. Jesus Himself said. "You cannot serve God and money" Matthew 6:24. God gave up the riches of heaven and entered the poverty of life among us, so that by His substitutionary atonement for our sins, we might be made rich forever. "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you by His poverty you might become rich." 2 Corinthians 8:9. Only our hope in this alone will ultimately defeat the monster of greed in our hearts.

## **Generosity**

We are all called upon to lay down something we consider our own, for the sake of another. At various times, this may include our comfort, our security, our reputation, our possessions, our time, or our money. Usually, the more you love the person the more likely you will be to make a sacrifice. Obviously, we are more likely to sacrifice any or all

of these things for our own child than we would for a stranger. As I examine my own heart, I see how my attitude toward each of the above categories is actually quite different. Perhaps many consider generosity to be limited to money, but we can be generous or stingy with so much more than our money. Since becoming an anesthesiologist, it had been rather easy for me to give away money, when I saw a need. This does not mean I am a generous man. I know this because, if you now asked me to give up a significant portion of my time for someone else, suddenly I would look a lot stingier. Suddenly I would spend a bit more time “weighing the cost.” I am incredibly selfish with my time. Each day I have an agenda, I want to stick to that agenda, and if anyone or anything threatens to upset that agenda, I get agitated. So, please don’t consider me to be generous (and please don’t interrupt my agenda).

## **Give until it hurts**

My pastor once told me that generosity should be somewhat painful for you, meaning it should cost you something. Most of the time I feel called to give away money it ‘costs’ me very little. But there was a time in my life when God did call me to “give until it hurts”.

In the very last week of 2010 Stephanie and I decided we wanted to be more intentional about the upcoming year, especially regarding our devotion to God. We decided to spend time in prayer asking God what He wanted us to do with the year to follow. My wife, being a more prayerful person than I, went first. After some time alone, listening to God, she told me she had heard something, but she didn’t want to tell me what it was. Rather, she wanted me to pray about it, get alone with God and see if I heard the same thing. That night I prayed, and I sensed God’s voice telling me to “give away half”, for one year.

The next morning, I asked my wife if God had told her to “give away half”. Her eyes welled with tears because she was so grateful that God had spoken the same word to me. My eyes welled with tears, but it was because I did not want to give away half, but I knew there was no turning back now.

So, for the following year, we took every paycheck and gave away half. It was in many ways such a joy to give so much away, and to meet so many needs. We gave money to our church, to Bible translation projects, to orphans and widows in Ethiopia. We had friends who were adopting and were going to have to empty their entire retirement savings account to complete the adoption. We were able to meet that need for them, and believe me, that felt good. But even on an anesthesiologist’s salary, it was painful for me. There were things we could have done with that other half, like paying off my student loans, taking certain vacations, or buying certain toys (for me, not for the kids). But ultimately, this was a time when God clearly called us to be generous. It involved taking the time to listen to Him, and it involved accepting his directive. It involved trusting Him and acknowledging that this money was not our own. It belonged to Him, and we were simply offering it back to Him. It involved surrender.

### **Questions for reflection:**

1. What area of your life, if taken away from you today, would most devastate you?
2. What does culture consider necessary for “the good life”? What does Jesus tell us is necessary to live “the good life”?
- 3.

In what ways have you been generous with your time, money, skills? In what ways have you failed to be generous? What would it take to become more generous?

# Chapter Seven

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## Another Chapter of History

Life giving faith grows beautiful and pure where gold grows beautiful  
and pure, the furnace  
Tim Keller

I believe one of the greatest examples of surrender we have in the Bible and in the history of the world is that of Abraham. Although the section of scripture below is lengthy, it is rich in meaning. As you read below, ask yourself, how would you have responded in Abraham's place?

*After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you." So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the*

*burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar. Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you." And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. And Isaac said to his father Abraham, "My father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." He said, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" Abraham said, "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So they went both of them together.*

*When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called the name of that place, "The Lord will provide" as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided." - Genesis 22:1-14*

Have you ever read the Bible and been utterly shocked? The above portion of Genesis can only be described as shocking. How can a God who we are told created us and loves us as a Father ask this man Abraham to sacrifice his only son? How can God, who made a covenant with Abraham and promised to bless him and make his descendants into a great nation, put him through a test such as this?

These verses were shocking to me before I had children, but they are even more so now that I do. I have asked myself many times, if God asked me to, could I do what Abraham did? Could I sacrifice my son or daughter, just because He told me to? If I am honest, the answer is no. I do not have the faith of Abraham. But perhaps I am asking the wrong question. Perhaps the question I should be asking is, 'what is this passage really about'? What does this story mean in the context of the entire history of redemption? What does this story tell us about God when viewed from the perspective of His story?

Although I grew up Catholic, upon entering my college years, I walked away from my faith. Surrounding me for the first time were young men and women who did not believe in any sort of god, and they began asking me difficult questions for which I had no answers. Although I walked away from the church, thankfully, God did not walk away from me. He pursued me, and after finishing college and medical school, I gave my life back to Christ. Shortly after returning to the Christian faith, I began attending a church in Seattle with my girlfriend (now wife) where the pastor set out to preach through the entire book of Genesis in one year. My whole life I had never heard someone preach through an entire book of the Bible, in fact the idea itself was shocking to me. I actually started reading Genesis, but when we got to Genesis 22 and the story of Abraham and Isaac, I was floored. I had chosen to follow this God of Christianity, but how could He do this? Worse, if He could ask something like this of Abraham, He might ask something equally horrifying of me.

I am truly grateful for the preaching I sat under during that time, as it was when God opened my eyes to the eternal significance of Genesis 22. Yes, this is a story about the testing of Abraham's faith, but more than that, this is a story about the faithfulness of God, and His fulfillment of His promises for His people. In this story, we see

God remain true to His promise to Abraham to “multiply you greatly” (Genesis 17:2) by stopping the execution of Isaac. In this story, we get a preview to God’s plan to remain true to His promise to one day redeem and restore His people *through* the execution of His son Jesus.

The story of Abraham and Isaac took place approximately 4000 years ago, 2000 before the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. Yet this story is crucial to our understanding of the gospel. This is a story about what it means to have faith, and what it means to surrender our most prized earthly relationships in exchange for an even more prized heavenly one. However, this is also a story not just about what God *can* do, but about what He is *going* to do.

As we try to imagine the searing pain tearing through Abraham’s heart as he prepared to sacrifice his son upon an altar, his son asks him, “but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” (Verse 7). Pay attention to Abraham’s response, “God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering” (verse 8). Think about that verse for a moment. God will provide for himself the offering. If it is true that “the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23), and if it is true that “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins” (Hebrews 9:22), then how can we ever be forgiven, how can we ever be saved? The answer came 2000 years later. The answer came when God DID “provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering”. God sent His Son to be that sacrificial lamb. God stayed Abraham’s hand from killing his son Isaac. But when Jesus Christ was laid upon the altar, the hand of the executioner was not stayed. That hand cut through the flesh of Christ, God’s only son, bringing to fruition that which was only foreshadowed 2000 years earlier. The story of Abraham and Isaac points us to Jesus. It not only points us to Jesus, but it points us to His death, upon an altar, the perfect, unstained, sinless lamb of God, offered up for us. “For

by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified” (Hebrews 10:14).

Abraham did not have the information that we have today. Unlike us, he could not look to the atoning sacrifice Jesus made on the cross. Yet he was in a relationship with God so strong, so intimate and so trusting he was willing to sacrifice the most precious thing to him, his only son. His was a unique story of surrender like no other. Abraham surrendered everything he had because of his faith in his Heavenly Father

As we were making the decision to surrender our comfortable life in the U.S. in exchange for a less comfortable life in Burundi that I began to think much more about the relationship between surrender and faith. Faith is still in many ways a mystery to me. It is something I know I have some of, and something I know I want much more of. I know I have merely a tenuous grasp of it, yet I know God is faithful and will not let me walk away from it. Faith is something that calls me to surrender. It calls me to a state of dependency and calls me to lay down my control at the feet of Him. In the words of Bonhoeffer, it “bids me come and die.”

So, how does faith and surrender work together? Does one surrender in order to receive faith? Or does one receive faith and the outworking of that faith includes surrender? If we read the story of Abraham through the lens of the New Testament, I think we get at least a partial answer to these questions.

“By faith Abraham when he was tested, offered Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, or whom it was said, ‘Through Isaac shall your offspring be named’. He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.” Hebrews 11:17-19

It was the outworking of faith that led Abraham to trust God enough to surrender his only son. It was faith that preceded surrender. Abraham knew who God was, knew he was faithful and good and He would fulfill His promise. *By faith* Abraham laid his only son upon the altar of God. In faith he surrendered.

So how does one “get faith”? Do you believe you are saved and will inherit eternal life because of what *you* do (your cleverness, your good works, or your obedience to God’s commandments), or because of what Christ has done? Perhaps some combination of the two? Is faith something you give to God or something that He gives to you? Think about how you would answer that question at this moment.

The story of Abraham and Isaac (and of course God) is a remarkable example of what it means to surrender in faith. This is not just a story about God testing Abraham (although it is that also), but it is a story of God’s gracious provision, ultimately fulfilled perfectly in the atoning death and resurrection of God’s very Son Jesus. Jesus was the lamb that God provided so that we might be reconciled with God and adopted into His family. May we have a faith pure and beautiful enough to believe the eternal realities revealed through this story, and may we then surrender to Him as the result of and fruit of that faith.

### **Questions for reflection:**

1. Do you believe that one surrenders oneself in order to receive faith? Or does one receive faith and the outworking of that faith includes surrender?

2. Reflecting on your life prior to accepting Christ as your Savior, in what ways were you “dead” in your trespasses and sins? How was your life different then from now?

3. Reflect on the passage from Galatians “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20). What does it mean to you to be crucified with Christ? What does it mean to you that Christ now lives in you?

# Chapter Eight

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## Surrender as Suffering

Abide hard by the cross and search the mystery of his wounds.

Charles Spurgeon

As I begin this chapter on surrender and suffering, part of me wishes I could tell you how much I have suffered for the sake of the gospel. I wish I could tell you about my time spent in prison, or the time that someone had a gun pointed at my head and demanded I renounce my faith. If I had stories like that, this would probably be a really good chapter. The truth is, I have suffered very little in my life, and I have suffered even less for my allegiance to Jesus. This is likely true of most Christians living in North America. Sadly, this is not true today for many Christians living in places like China, Iraq, and Sudan.

Even Friedrich Nietzsche, the great atheistic philosopher once said, “To live is to suffer, to survive is to find some meaning in the suffering.” Nietzsche, who sought to live as if God does not exist searched for meaning in suffering. We cannot escape suffering in this life. The

longer you live, the more opportunities you will have to suffer. The more you invest in deep and loving relationships with people, the more you will suffer. When you actually arrive at the point where you resolve yourself to surrender to God's will for your life you will ... wait for it ..... yes, suffer even more.

## **The Context of Suffering**

“Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through Our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person - through perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die - but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.  
Romans 5:1-8

This is a very dense portion of scripture, but I want to focus on verses 3-5 and its theology of suffering. The harsh reality is that you cannot escape suffering in this life. I heard a pastor once say that everyone in this world is either heading into a trial, going through a trial, or coming out of a trial. The Bible is filled with passages that speak on human suffering, so it seems God wants us to have a proper “theology of suffering.” To be sure this is a huge topic, but I will draw out a few key points

The passage above speaks of a lot more than just suffering. It speaks of justification by faith, and hope, it speaks of the reconciliation between us and God which Jesus secured for us. So, why did I not just copy and paste verses 3-5. I chose this larger portion of scripture because the surrounding passages give us a context for suffering that we do not get when we read 3-5 alone. And I think this context is massively important in developing a proper theology of suffering.

I started paying more attention to the topic of suffering a couple years ago when I read Tim Keller's excellent book, *Walking With God Through Pain and Suffering*.<sup>24</sup> Keller conducts an overview of different historical and cultural perspectives on suffering and concludes that every other culture and time and history attached significance and weight and meaning to human suffering, except ours. Meaning in suffering is something we very much lack in North America today. Most of us have been conditioned to believe our main purpose in life is to make ourselves happy. If your main goal in life is your happiness, well-being, success, and health, then how do you process the suffering that threatens those things? You can try to avoid suffering, you can try to minimize it, you can try to medicate it with alcohol, or drugs, or TV, or any number of things. But what if there actually is purpose and meaning behind our suffering? What if by avoiding, or minimizing, or medicating we are missing out on the personal and spiritual growth that comes from a deeper understanding of what we are going through? I believe what we need today is a deeper understanding of suffering, and I believe the Bible provide it. Suffering is a topic of vast depth, which I am only qualified to dip my toes in, but it is my hope you will begin to lean into suffering a bit more. Begin to ask more questions and to seek to understand how God is working through suffering, both your own and the people that you love. God does not let suffering go wasted.

It is not my intention to give you a quick fix for your next big crisis. The truth is that suffering is complex. Each person's situation of suffering is unique and how each person processes suffering is completely unique. Likely this is at least partially because the work that God wants to do in each of us is unique. I certainly don't want to try to classify suffering, but it is obvious there are different types of suffering. Some people suffer as a result of their own sin, or their own foolish choices. If you rob a bank, you will suffer the consequences. If you drink too much alcohol, you will get drunk, probably make some foolish choices, and then feel very sick the next morning. Then there is suffering that comes as a result of simply professing the Christian faith. The Bible has a lot to say about this sort of suffering. 2 Timothy 3:12 says, "Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." This is something you may experience on a small scale, but there are places around the world today where openly being a Christian means risking your life. Although most of us do not fear for our lives as a result of our faith, perhaps you have faced isolation from family, friends or co-workers because of your faith. God cares immensely about this, and He has a lot to say about it.

Then there is suffering that comes from what often seems to be no good reason whatsoever. For most of us who are not typically out robbing banks and are not witnessing on the streets of North Korea, this is the kind of suffering we are going to see, often at random and unexpected times. We are going to suffer the loss of our health, the loss of people we love, financial ruin, or a car crash. This is the kind of suffering that often challenges our faith the most, a suffering that is mysterious to us, but not to God.

There is one more type of suffering which is when we intentionally enter into the suffering of others. The Bible is filled with calls for us to "fulfill our ministry," to "do good to others," to "care for the poor and

the sick.” If you consider these calls, it is clear you cannot do any kind of ministry without entering into the suffering of others. As you pour out your life for the sake of your neighbor, the poor, the ill, you are entering into their suffering at a cost to yourself. John Stott wrote, “The place of suffering in service and of passion in mission is hardly ever taught today. But the greatest single secret of evangelistic or missionary effectiveness is the willingness to suffer and die. It may be a death to popularity (by faithfully preaching the unpopular biblical gospel), or to pride (by the use of modest methods in reliance on the Holy Spirit), or to racial and national pride (by identification with another culture), or to material comfort (by adopting a simple lifestyle). But the servant must suffer if he is to bring light to the nations, and the seed must die if it is to multiply.”<sup>25</sup>

As for my personal experiences of suffering, growing up I would have to say that I did not suffer much. I grew up in a loving home with healthy and kind parents. I went to school, enjoyed hobbies and friends. It was not until my daughter’s cancer diagnosis that I began to experience suffering in a real and personal sense. This was by far my darkest hour as Ella went through major surgery, followed by 6 months of chemotherapy, and today- praise be to God - she has been healthy and cancer free for thirteen years. But this was a time when my wife and I had to face the very real possibility of losing our daughter. We experienced the fear of this possibility as well as the pain of watching our daughter getting poked with needles, cut open with a scalpel, poisoned with nauseating chemotherapy drugs, all of which we wished more than anything that we could take upon ourselves to spare her even a fraction of what she was going through.

Aside from this experience with our daughter, my other experiences of suffering have all been quite different. As an anesthesiologist in the US, I often interacted with people who were suffering tremen-

dously, often with life-threatening or even terminal illnesses. But these interactions were short, maybe 3 to 5 minutes before surgery, and I was very focused on the anesthetic and not on the bigger problem they are dealing with. Often there was a medical team tapping their feet waiting for me to finish, so they could begin the surgery. So, the depth of relationship with these suffering people was quite limited. This was not the case in Burundi where I served as an anesthesiologist but also as the hospital's critical care doctor. Seeing patients who were critically ill with a team of medical students was not an easy job in a place with no ventilators, limited treatment options and no specialty centers to transfer complicated patients. Through this work I had the opportunity to truly enter into the suffering of others. I sat with mothers as their children died. I had to have those hard conversations with families whose loved ones would not survive. I had the opportunity to enter into the suffering of others like I never had before. It was hard and often painful work, but I consider it a great privilege and a blessing that I got to be a part of this. A veteran medical missionary who had spent around 20 years in rural Africa, serving in rural Kenya and Uganda, surviving civil war and two Ebola outbreaks, once told me that he considered himself a "student of suffering". This man had walked through immense suffering, and his awareness has stuck with me, as I have considered what it means to be a "student of suffering." I have realized that if you want to study this field, you will learn a tremendous amount not just about suffering but about God, about man, about life. There is so much we can learn when we allow ourselves to be students of suffering.

## **How can a Good God allow suffering?**

This question may not be explicitly answered in this passage in Romans, but it is an important place to start because this can be a stumbling block for many non-believers. For years this question plagued me as I could not imagine how a good God could allow so much suffering. Of course, as I was asking this question, I was seeking answers based on my own logic and not during reading my Bible, or asking people who might have answers or even going to church. In my pride I thought if I can't come up with an answer, then there must not be one. In retrospect, this was something like rejecting someone for some action without letting them to explain or justify themselves. I can only attribute this to my foolishness and my pride.

According to the Bible, although God may allow and even use pain and suffering, He did not create a world with suffering. He created a world that was perfect, free from sin and free from the effects of sin. But He also created a world where humans were given freedom. We were given freedom to obey or reject His commandments. We have chosen to reject them. We have chosen to reject Him. So, as sin entered the world, so did suffering and death. As John Stott says in *The Cross of Christ*, "suffering is an alien intrusion into God's good world, and will have no part in his new universe."<sup>26</sup>

Tim Keller's book "The Reason for God" is very helpful in explaining the subject of suffering. He starts by addressing the very problem I struggled with: if evil appears pointless to me, then it must be pointless. But Keller explains, "This reasoning is, of course, fallacious. Just because you can't see or imagine a good reason why God might allow something to happen doesn't mean there can't be one. Again, we see lurking within supposedly hard-nosed skepticism an enormous faith in one's own cognitive faculties. If our minds can't plumb the depths of the universe for good answers to suffering, well, then, there can't be any! This is blind faith of a high order."<sup>27</sup>

If you simply start to read the Bible, you will see story after story of God allowing suffering for what later turns out to be often a great and good purpose. Already in the book of Genesis we read the story of Joseph, whose brothers hated him, and cast him into a pit where he was found by the Egyptians and then sentenced to a life of slavery and misery. You can be sure that Joseph prayed to God to help him escape, and yet there he languished, and no doubt suffered. But as we keep reading, we see how God used the suffering of Joseph. Eventually, after years for suffering, Joseph gained a position of influence before Pharaoh, and he eventually became prime minister of Egypt. The result of his suffering was the rescue of thousands of lives, including that of his own family from starvation, during the worst famine the region had ever know.

We see stories like this over and over again in the Bible. As Keller says, “with time and perspective most of us can see good reasons for at least SOME of the tragedy and pain that occurs in life. Why couldn’t it be possible that, from God’s vantage point, there are good reasons for all of them?”<sup>28</sup>

I think that term “vantage point” is important. For people who have not accepted the promises of the Christian faith, this world may be all that there is. If this is true, then yes, you are not going to find answers to many of the most tragic things that you see happening or that you may even experience directly. However, if death is not the end, then our vantage point needs to change. As C. S. Lewis says in the *Great Divorce*, “They say of some temporal suffering, ‘No future bliss can make up for it,’ not knowing that Heaven, once attained, will work backward and turn even that agony into a glory.”<sup>29</sup>

## God Does Not Let Your Suffering Go Wasted

Let's return to Romans 5:3 which says, "suffering produces endurance." Suffering *produces*. These two words alone should be an encouragement to us. Suffering is not pointless. There is a fruit produced by suffering and it starts with endurance. Endurance is vital to our spiritual, emotional, and even physical lives. We all know what it means to throw in the towel, whether in a sporting event at our job or sadly in our family lives. Endurance is the ability to continue or despite fatigue, stress, or other obstacles. It is stamina. Without endurance, you will not continue or last and you will simply give up. You will never see the finish line, where glory is found.

Scars are a good analogy for how we live with suffering. When you are cut deeply either by accident or in a surgery, as that cut heals over time you are left with a scar. While it is not always beautiful from the outside, that scar is always stronger than the skin around it. If you try to cut that scar you find it is much tougher than the skin that was there before. It is the same with our suffering. Through suffering we are often left with emotional or spiritual scarring. However, this often creates a strength in us, a stamina that gives us endurance. Some of the strongest people I have ever met are people who have suffered tragic losses that I can't even imagine going through. But here they stand on the other side, strengthened, continuing to run the race before them. We can learn so much from people like this. I would encourage you to find people, especially Christians you know have suffered tragedy in their lives and ask them what God did in them through the suffering, through the scarring. We can learn a lot from people about the meaning of suffering just by starting to ask questions.

So, what comes next? Endurance produces character. Character is an interesting word. Have you ever considered what character is? It

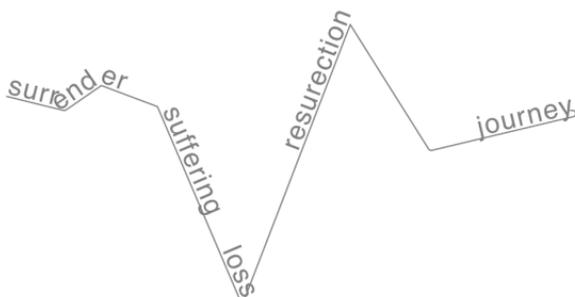
often refers to an aggregate of the traits or features that make up a person, and often it is used in a more positive sense to mean qualities of honesty, courage, or integrity. As God grows us in our endurance, our very character changes. Who we are is sharpened and refined, through our suffering. My wife and I were changed deeply through what we went through with our daughter. Our character was changed, and our relationship with God was changed, it was deepened, and made more intimate.

Finally, character produces hope, which is closely aligned with faith itself. For those called by Christ Jesus, suffering ultimately strengthens and grows our faith in the Gospel and in the promises of God. Tim Keller said, “life giving faith grows beautiful and pure where gold grows beautiful and pure... the furnace.” This is a beautiful picture. On the other side of suffering, there is hope, there is beauty, there is gold. Even in our darkest hour, God’s love is not removed from us, but rather is “poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” – Romans 5:5. This is vitally important. If you can get to the point where you believe this is true, it will change the way you experience suffering, and it will allow you to walk through suffering *with* God. That is not to say the suffering will somehow be easier or less painful. But knowing these promises, you can allow God to work through your suffering and you will have something to sustain you through it, hope.

God does not let your suffering go wasted. Your suffering can and will produce in you endurance, character and hope. Through your suffering you can and will be changed, refined, and ultimately made more beautiful and more useful for the work that God has for you, either in this life, or in the life to come. God does not let your suffering go wasted.

## The Good News About Suffering

While at that retreat where I suffered (both from the broken AC and a break down), one speaker used the following image to relay the interplay of suffering, surrender, loss, resurrection, and journey. Given that many of those attending were medical professionals it was a very familiar shape to many of us:



The arrangement above is that of an ECG tracing the rhythm of a heartbeat. There is a rhythm in the Gospel. This rhythm of surrender, suffering, loss, resurrection, and journey is the heartbeat of the Gospel. Martin Luther King Jr. once said that “unearned suffering is redemptive.” These words are a great summary of God’s plan for salvation. In Romans 5:8 we read “but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God.” Jesus Christ made the ultimate sacrifice so our relationship with God, which had been broken since the time

Adam and Eve sinned against Him, might be restored and we might be reconciled to God.

Jesus Christ suffered more deeply than we could ever imagine, and it was so much more than physical suffering. On the cross Jesus suffered the loss of His relationship with the Father. Many of us know what it is like to lose a relationship. If you are abandoned by a friend, you feel pain. If you are abandoned by a spouse, that pain is even greater. Now imagine the relationship that Jesus had with the Father. This was the most intimate relationship in the history of the universe. This relationship had been perfect fellowship since the beginning of time. Yet as Jesus approaches the cross, taking all of our sins upon Himself, the wrath of God is poured out on Him. In that moment Jesus was not just suffering the physical pain of crucifixion, as terrible as that must have been, but more than that, He was experiencing His Father's abandonment.

I have heard non-believers say God does not care about our suffering. Whatever is true of God and suffering, the Gospel means it is *not* possible for God to not care about suffering. He cares so much about it He was willing to enter into humanity, to suffer the abandonment of His disciples, the humiliation of crowds of people, the physical suffering of torture and crucifixion, and then ultimately the loss of the deepest most important relationship, all for our sake. The Gospel means God cares deeply about suffering.

Whatever our suffering may mean, it *cannot* mean that God does not care. There is purpose and meaning behind all suffering, just as there was behind the suffering of Jesus Christ. I want for us to be a people that suffers well. I want our suffering to be saturated in the Gospel. This does not mean that we will just float through suffering unaffected. No, we will still weep and cry out to God, we will still have pain, but our suffering will be saturated in hope, knowing that there is

purpose and meaning, knowing that unearned suffering is redemptive. We may see the meaning behind our suffering on the other side of our trials, we may see it 20 years later, or we may not see it until we finish our race and receive the inheritance which Jesus has prepared for us. But whether we see it now or not, the meaning is there. Unearned suffering is redemptive.

### **Questions for reflection:**

1. In what ways has God used suffering in your life? Looking back on that suffering can you see how God may have produced fruit in your life through this?
2. What does our culture say about the purpose behind suffering?
3. How does the Gospel address of the question of suffering?

# Chapter Nine

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## Surrender as Worship

The heart of worship is surrender.

Rick Warren

“**A**nd while he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he was reclining at table, a woman came with an alabaster flask of ointment of pure nard, very costly, and she broke the flask and poured it over his head. There were some who said to themselves indignantly, “Why was the ointment wasted like that? For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii and given to the poor.” And they scolded her. But Jesus said, “Leave her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you want, you can do good for them. But you will not always have me. She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for burial. And truly, I say to you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her.” Mark 14:3-9

Who was this woman and what was it exactly that she did for Jesus? We do not get a lot of details about her from this passage, but we can infer a great deal about her. It is likely that she was poor. Jesus was surrounded by poor people His disciples were poor. He is spending time in the home of a leper. It seems unlikely that this woman was a person of great wealth. This seems even more likely because she was rebuked by the disciples (verse 5, 'and they scolded her'). One does not often rebuke someone who is from a higher social caste than yourself. So, what was it that she did for Jesus? Simply put, I believe what she did was to come before Jesus and worship Him. I believe what we see in this passage is an act of pure, adorational, extravagant worship. Jesus said that she did a "beautiful thing to me." Many of us consider worship to be singing songs and telling Jesus how wonderful He is. And that certainly is worship, but that is not the end of worship. Whenever you devote or offer something of yourself to Jesus, you are worshipping. This can be your time, your gifts, your money, or any other number of things. It is devoting that which God has given you, back to Him, out of love.

What was it that she poured out over Jesus? It was that which was "very costly" to her. The text tells us that this ointment was worth more than three hundred denarii. A denarii was about equal to a day's wage so this was worth about a year's wages. It's very possible this perfume was the most expensive thing the woman owned. I would ask you, when was the last time you poured out that which is very costly to yourself for the sake of Jesus? When was the last time you did "a beautiful thing" for Him?

What was the real motivation for this woman to pour out for Jesus this very costly perfume? This is to me the most important question we need to answer. You could stop reading here and say to yourself "I need to sell all my possessions and give the proceeds to the poor or the

church,” but apart from a proper motivation to do so, you would only be doing this for yourself, in an attempt to make yourself appear more righteous, or out of a sense of guilt. Any worship that is motivated out of guilt or pride, is not worship of God, but rather worship of yourself. God is not honored by this. This is not what we want, because this is not what God wants.

I believe this woman did this because she was absolutely captivated by the beauty and kindness and authority of Jesus. This woman had likely spent time with Jesus before this day, she had likely heard Him preach and seen Him lead and proclaim and heal, and she understood the value and worth of *This Man*. What she did was a model of humility and devotion. What she did was a model of *surrender*.

This woman understood who Jesus was, and she responded by pouring out to Him, her greatest worldly possession in a moment of reckless extravagance. Clearly, she loved Jesus very much, she adored him. One Bible scholar says, “there is a recklessness in love which refuses to count the cost.”<sup>30</sup> Another describes her actions as “unique in its thoughtfulness, regal in its lavishness and marvelous in its timeliness.”<sup>31</sup> I think that describes what she did incredibly well. The extravagance and lavishness of what she did was evidence of the depth of her love for Him.

What I want more than anything, is for us to understand who Jesus is and to be absolutely captivated by Him. When you truly understand the person and work of Jesus, you will be compelled to pour out your life, your time, your money, your gifts, everything, for the sake of Him, who alone is worthy.

So, how does one become “captivated” by Jesus? This work is done by the Holy Spirit, who quickens our affections for Jesus, the Son (another topic for another book). But we are called to posture ourselves and to submit to the Holy Spirit’s work, by spending time

with Jesus and growing in our understanding of what He did for us. We do this in many ways, through prayer, through time in God's word, through the study of His attributes, through Christian community, but ultimately it is simply about time spent with Christ. We do this by sitting at the feet of Jesus. Jesus has not called us into a new religion, but into a relationship with Himself.

Many of us (and I know this has been true in my life at times) are not captivated by Jesus because we don't understand our need for Him. No matter how good you think you are, you have a sin problem. No matter how much you might believe that you are "good enough" to get to God, you are not. I am not. The Bible teaches this, and our experience testifies to this. We are a group of broken, needy, wretched sinners who cannot save ourselves. The more deeply we understand this, the more we will recognize our need for someone else to save us. The only one who can - and already has done this is Christ Himself. Jesus did not die on a cross because of some whimsical idea God the Father had. He died because we have sinned against and offended a Holy, perfect, and just God, and God's justice would not allow our sin to just be swept under the carpet, it had to be atoned for. Justice had to be carried out, otherwise God would not be a just God. In His perfect mercy *and* His perfect justice, He sent His son to be punished in our place so when we accept what He did in our place, all of our sins and our filth would be placed upon Jesus, and all of His righteousness and acceptance before God would be placed upon us. Once this great transaction takes place and God looks upon us, He no longer sees our sin. He sees the perfect life of Jesus, the Son. Theologians call this the "double imputation", all of our sins imputed to Jesus and all of His righteousness imputed to us. This is the monumental significance of what happened on the cross.

So, who do you understand Jesus to be? Do you believe that He not only died in your place, but was raised from the dead, and now sits in glory? Do you believe He even today is making intercession for you (Hebrews 7:25)? Do you believe “He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature” (Hebrews 1:3)? Do you believe through the substitutionary atonement of Jesus, God has reconciled the world to himself (2 Corinthians 5:18)?

There is a key verse in Ephesians 5 that gives us the ultimate reason why we should be captivated by Christ in light of this story of the woman pouring out her oil. Ephesians 5:1-2, “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” As this woman poured out a fragrant offering upon the head of Jesus, so days later, Jesus poured out his very life, his very blood, as a fragrant offering to God for her and for us! What this woman did was only a reflection of what Jesus did for us.

The more deeply you understand who Jesus is and what He has done on your behalf, the more your actions will reflect the action of this woman.

So, what might it look like today for someone to pour out for Jesus their most valued possession? This can obviously play out in a thousand different ways but let’s look at a few examples of people I have met who live reckless extravagance for the sake of the gospel.

## **Gary Parker**

I have had the privilege to work in many parts of Africa with mission groups who serve the poor and the outcasts of society. My first trip was to Ghana with Mercy Ships, an organization who run a surgical hospital on a ship. On my first day on board I met with Gary Parker,

an oral and maxillofacial surgeon from the US. I will never forget Gary, because in him I saw a beautiful reflection of Christ. I saw a man captured by Jesus, and a deep understanding of the Gospel. The result of his relationship with Christ, inspired Gary to surrender what many of us would consider “the good life”. Instead of staying in the us and earning half a million dollars a year, he had spent 18 years living in a small cabin on a boat in West Africa. He and his wife raised their children on that ship, relying on the financial support of family and friends and the church. Gary had a picture hung in the on-board operating room of their first day docking in Sierra Leone. It showed a line of probably 500 people, each of them with facial tumors and deformities. These were the true outcasts of society, many of whom had walked for days to get to this boat. Gary would sit with every one of them and look them in the eye, showing them a compassion and concern they had never experienced before. He treated their physical needs and told them about the One who showed him compassion, the only One who can offer them eternal healing.

## **Birtukan**

Birtukan grew up in the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa in poverty. As a child she was supported by World Vision, who supplied her with food, clothing, and an education. She was also given the Gospel and accepted Jesus as her personal savior. Once Birtukan graduated from the World Vision program she got a job with them. Around this time, her mother passed away and she also inherited her small house. One day she felt God telling her it was her turn to care for the orphans of Ethiopia, and so she offered the most valuable thing she had, her home. She opened up her home first to one orphan, then another, then another. She and her husband ran *Yezelalem Minch* a non-profit

which supported over 1500 orphans in and around Addis Ababa until her death from COVID-19 in 2022.

But I don't want you to think that you have to move to Africa to live in a sacrificial way for Christ. There are countless people living in rich and developed countries who pour out their lives in very costly ways because of their understanding of and love for Jesus.

I want to encourage you today to seek a greater understanding of the person and deity of Jesus Christ, and of His infinite value and worth. This is something all of us, including myself, need to grow in every day. You may think you have a proper understanding of Jesus .... but you do not. 19<sup>th</sup> century pastor and theologian J. C. Ryle wrote, "No person ever thought too much of Christ."<sup>32</sup> I would go one step further and say, "no person ever thought ENOUGH of Christ".

Looking back, what was the end result of this woman's pouring out her most valued possession for Jesus? Her king was anointed for burial in a great act of worship that has been read about for 2000 years. Note Jesus says, "wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her". Jesus, understanding what was about to happen to Him, knew this "Good News" would be proclaimed in the "whole world." This was not something He was doing just for the Jews, or just for a handful of people, or even just for us, modern day Americans, but this great act of divine justice and mercy was to be proclaimed to the whole world. This great end is accomplished as more and more people become captivated by Christ and are grafted into His family, and then they go and pour themselves out for the sake of His name, for His glory. In Revelation 7:9 the Apostle John gives us a glimpse of what is to come, "After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm

branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, 'Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb'." Just like the woman in Mark 14 worships Jesus, so will the nations worship. This is the end for which we were made.

I believe anytime we truly worship Jesus, motivated by love and thankfulness, we are entering into eternity. What could be more important?

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you." - John 15:12-14

Six days after He was anointed by this woman, Jesus laid down His life for His friends, for all who would believe in Him, in the greatest act of love the world has ever known. Who or what could ever be more worthy of your devotion?

What does it look like for you to offer back to Jesus the most costly of what you have? For some, it will be money, for some, it will be time spent discipling and caring for your neighbors, for some it will be your reputation as you stand up against what you know to be dishonoring to God. For all of us, it will be the gifts that God has given us, which we now get to offer back to God. As we grow in this, our care for the poor will not diminish, but will grow, as we understand our spiritual state apart from the finished work of Christ. "If you do not love the poor, you do not understand what God has done for you."<sup>33</sup>

But please, do not try to do this apart from an understanding of what Jesus has done for you, do not try to sacrifice your greatest treasure until you are at a point where you are captivated by Jesus Christ, His goodness, His justice, His mercy, His love, His holiness, and by the perfect sacrifice that He has made for you. Get to know Him.

**Questions for reflection:**

1. Give an example of an act of worship that you have witnessed, outside of a church service.
2. What prevents you from surrendering your heart and mind to God as you enter into worship?
3. What would it look like to offer to Jesus the mostly costly of what you have?

# Chapter Ten

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## Surrendering to His Word

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly  
believed,  
knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have  
been acquainted with the sacred writings,  
which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ  
Jesus.

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for  
reproof, for correction,  
and for training in righteousness, that the servant of God may be  
competent, equipped for every good work  
2 Timothy 14-17

Do you want to be a servant of God? Do you want to be competent?  
Do you want to be equipped for every good work? Do you want to be  
wise for salvation? Most of us would answer yes. Upon examination  
of our lives, most of us would likely admit these are weighty things we

fall short of, yet deeply long for. Yet here we have the key to unlock our true potential. Here we have the source of wisdom and knowledge. Our only hope to achieve this higher state of being is found in the written word of God, and we will only be changed by this Word when we submit to its authority over us.

Kevin DeYoung said in *Taking God at his Word*, "Scripture, because it is the breathed-out word of God, possesses the same authority as the God-man Jesus Christ. Submission to the Scriptures is submission to God. Rebellion against the Scriptures is rebellion against God. The Bible can no more fail, falter, or err, than God himself can fail, falter, or err." <sup>34</sup>It is only when we recognize and acknowledge the authority of scripture that we will re-order our lives in accordance with that word.

There is a crisis in the North American church today as there are more and more churches that call into question the authority of the Bible. Why they do this is complicated, but the effects are clear - an unraveling of the relationship those churches have with Jesus. Yes, Jesus can show up and speak to us in dreams and revelations, but the primary way He speaks to us today is through His written and inerrant Word. If we begin to doubt parts of that Word, it is the crucial first step to doubting all of it. We need God's Word and we need to submit to this word. He has spoken, and when we toss it aside, we are tossing aside the very core of our faith.

When we speak of surrender, the ultimate guide that we have for how to do this, is God's written word. The Bible teaches us how to grow in our faith, our righteousness, our holiness. It teaches us how God wants us to parent, to work, how to love our neighbors. We desperately need God's word, and we need to recognize it for what it is, His unfailing, inerrant, unchanging, and perfect word. This is not to deny the power and working of the Holy Spirit who leads and guides

us and speaks to us, but even this voice must be accord with scripture. If you believe the Holy Spirit is speaking to you, even commanding you to take action, does that command square with the written Word of God?

We are called, as true disciples of Jesus to be obedient to His word. The call to surrender is ultimately a call to obedient faith, faith expressing itself in obedience to the call of Jesus. Jesus called the apostles with the simple command, “follow me.” Following Jesus was the first step in faith. Yet, they could not follow without faith. Here we see obedience and faith as being linked so deeply that you cannot have one without the other. Without obedience, faith ceases to be faith. Without faith, there is no obedience. While we affirm the apostle Paul, “by works of the law no one will be justified” (Galatians 2:16) we at the same time affirm the apostle James who says, “So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead (James 2:17). Yes, and yes. Ours is a call to obedient faith, and it is through God’s inspired and authoritative word that the working out of that obedience is given shape and form.

Ray Ortlund, in his book *Proverbs: Wisdom that Works* says, “do you let the Bible overrule your own thinking? It says in verse 5, “Do not lean on your own understanding.” Do you merely agree with the Bible, or do you obey the Bible? My dog sometimes agrees with me, but she never obeys me. *If you merely agree with the Bible, then your response is not obedience but coincidence.* It’s just that the prejudices you have soaked up from your culture happen to line up with the Bible at that point. But what do you do when the Bible contradicts what you want to be true? If you are looking in the Bible for excuses to do what you want anyway, you have in fact rejected God. But if you trust the Lord, you will let the Bible challenge your most cherished thoughts and feelings.”<sup>35</sup> (emphasis added)

Here lies the truly diagnostic question, do you obey the Bible only when you agree with it? What about when you disagree, or when it runs counter to your own logic, or when it causes you to do things that will be painful and hard? “If you merely agree with the Bible, then your response is not obedience but coincidence.”

Again, Keving DeYoung says “Scripture is profitable for training in righteousness. No one succeeds at the highest level in sports without working out. No one makes it in music without lots of practice. No one excels in scholarship without years of study. And no one makes it far in the school of holiness without hours and days and years in the word. You and I simply will not mature as quickly, minister as effectively, or live as gloriously without immersing ourselves in the Scriptures.”<sup>36</sup>

How do we know that the Bible is the spoken words of God Himself? That is a big question, and there have been many excellent books written on the canon of scripture. In the end, our trust in the accuracy and necessity of the Bible, is based on the faithfulness of God Himself. We know He is faithful, and He is good, and so we believe He has directed the words and collections of the 66 books of the Bible for our edification, for our good, out of love for us. As Wayne Grudem writes, “The preservation and correct assembling of the canon of Scripture should ultimately be seen by believers, then, not as part of church history subsequent to God’s great central acts of redemption for his people, but as an integral part of the history of redemption itself. Just as God was at work in creation, in the calling of his people Israel, in the life, death and resurrection of Christ, and in the early work and writings of the apostles, so God was at work in the preservation and assembling together of the books of Scripture for the benefit of his people for the entire church age. Ultimately, then,

we base our confidence in the correctness of our present canon on the faithfulness of God.”<sup>37</sup>

## **The Seed**

“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.” Isaiah 55:10-11

God gave me a very special gift in 2011. It came in the mail in late summer. It was a small booklet, maybe 40 pages long. It was a booklet that would change the lives of 400,000 people forever. And I could not read a single word of it.

As we prayed about how to steward well the 50% of our income we gave away in 2011, we felt called to Bible translation work. I have always had a great interest in language, and since becoming a follower of Jesus Christ, that interest was transformed into a desire to see God’s word translated for those who do not have it. Stephanie and I decided to begin monthly financial and prayer support for a Bible translation project in Mozambique for a people group of 400,000 who had never experienced God’s word in their own tongue.

Through the Seed company, we would get quarterly updates on how our project was doing. Then one day in late summer we received a package came in the mail from the Seed company. It was the first ever translation of the Gospel of Mark for this people group in. It is impossible for me to convey the joy I was filled with when I opened this package. Every day for weeks afterward, the first thing I thought about every morning was this huge population of people, who could

now read God's word in their own language. It was one of the greatest encouragements to my faith I have ever received.

There is a massive need for missionaries to GO to the ends of the earth and share the gospel with people who have never heard It before. Clearly Jesus has called all of us, as His disciples to now "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." Matthew 28:19-20. However, not all of us are called to go to foreign lands, but we can all be a part of the work that these international missionaries are doing by sending them, by praying fervently for them, by encouraging them, and by supporting them financially in this work. This work comes at a great cost, and without the support of the church body, this work would not get done. Some of us are called to fulfill the great commission by quitting our jobs, boarding an airplane, and living among a people group in a distant land. Others are called to fulfill the great commission by sending them with our time, our prayers, and our money. We are indeed called to surrender these for the sake of the Great Commission, in response to God's Word and out of a desire to see that Word go out among the nations.

### **Questions for reflection:**

1. What parts of the bible do you struggle to submit (surrender) to? Why? Is it because you personally believe they are in error, or because the culture around you tells you this?

2. How much time do you spend each day or each week reading God's Word? What changes would you have to make to spend more time (or at least more meaningful time) reading the Bible?

3. Who do you know personally who you could give a Bible to? How do you think they might respond?

# Chapter Eleven

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## Freedom

Eventually, the things we own begin to own us

Brad Pitt in Fight Club

For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not  
submit again to a yoke of slavery

Galatians 5:1

One of the great paradoxes of the Christian faith is that, as we surrender ourselves to the Lordship of Christ, we gain freedom. Many of us do not recognize the yoke of slavery we live under apart from Christ. We feel free yet, just as the alcoholic begins to unravel when you take away his wine, see how we respond when you take away our savings accounts, our nice clothes, or our reputations. We are indeed slaves to these things, and we are indeed slaves to sin.

Jesus said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.” (John 8:31) Jesus understood the power sin, and idolatry have to enslave us, and He came that we might be rescued from this slavery. The power to rescue us from this slavery comes from our new standing as sons and daughters of God the Father. Paul says in Galatians 4:4-7, “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent

forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoptions as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'. So, you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God”.

The answer to our slavery problem, is to be adopted as sons and daughters of God Himself, brothers and sisters with Christ, heirs of His Kingdom. Jesus says, “So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:36). Once we have this new standing, we are free from slavery and bondage because we have been freed from the effects of sin, because Jesus has removed our transgressions from us, and taken them upon Himself.

This is very good news and cause for celebration. Can you imagine what it must have been like for the slaves of early America to finally be set free? Can you imagine the joy they experienced? If only we understood the reality of our situation, as they did theirs, we too would be filled with such joy, such heart of gladness, and such thankfulness to The Father for adopting us. We are free because of what Christ has done for us.

### **The Slavery of Poverty**

“Poverty is about relationships that don't work, that isolate, that abandon, or devalue. Transformation must be about restoring relationships, just and right relationships with God, with self, with community, with the 'other' and with the environment.”<sup>38</sup>

Since coming to work in Africa the topic of transformation development has become one that is very important to me. The above quote from Bryant Myers has helped me better understand the complexity of poverty as well as the importance of approaching development work from a holistic perspective. I am increasingly realizing how confused my thinking about poverty has been and how much I still must learn.

I am beginning to recognize how much poverty in this world is rooted in slavery, physical, psychological, and spiritual slavery. These broken relationships lead people into the slavery of poverty.

The idea that poverty is broken relationships has shifted the entire paradigm of development work, and I have seen how this shift in thinking is playing out in East Africa. The long-term missionaries we work with at Kibuye, Burundi spent an entire year of studying Kirundi (the local language) before settling there. They did this because they understood you cannot develop meaningful relationships with people without understanding and speaking their own “heart language.” They have committed to being here for many years, because relationships are not developed and nurtured over a few weeks but rather over years, and decades. While I have learned enough French to get by in the hospital (as medical training is done in French) and teach the points I think are important for my students, my fluency in French is far from allowing me to relate to the people I work with (aside from the few who speak English). My Kirundi skills, (or lack thereof) prohibit me from developing relationships with my patients, and the people who live and work around us (all people who I desperately want to know more deeply).

I confess - to my shame - that much of my motivation for coming to Africa was because I wanted to rescue needy people. The problem is, I am just as needy as the people I came to rescue. I am learning that historically it is the people who come with this ‘savior complex’ who have done the most damage. My thinking, my attitude, and my heart all need changing.

Myer’s also develops the idea of the “poverty of the non-poor”. While those living in poverty are often trapped in a web of lies about their own self-worth and value, the non-poor are often equally entrapped in a web of lies about the significance of their (our) wealth

and material possessions. We believe our cars, homes and retirement savings define us, and we believe because we possess these things, our value and worth is greater than those without them. We too are slaves. As Brad Pitt said in *Fight Club*, “eventually, the things we own, begin to own us”. Sadly, this has often been (and still is) true of my own heart and is often reflected in how I live. Oh Brad Pitt, you are as wise as you are handsome.

This idea of poverty being about broken relationships also is a great reminder of the Gospel. It was God who did the ultimate work of restoring our broken relationship with Him, by sending His Son, to save, to redeem and to restore us. Our Creator and Father, who loved us enough to not leave us in our impoverished condition. This is my ultimate motivation to continue in this labor. This is the source of our drive, as well as the goal for which we strive. “For you were called to freedom, bothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Galatians 5:13-14). God has set us free, and He has called us to now go and proclaim that freedom to those still in bondage, to labor for their freedom, to love them, as we love ourselves. May God’s freedom work continue. May God receive the glory for His work.

### **Questions for reflection:**

1. How do you define poverty? How have you seen poverty addressed well or poorly?
2. How does the Gospel of Jesus Christ set us free? What are we freed from?
- 3.

Before you accepted Christ as your Savior, what you were you enslaved to? What might you still be enslaved to?

# Chapter Twelve

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## The Last Word

Shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me?

Jesus

There is no greater example of surrender than Jesus. There is no greater person we could now surrender to than Jesus. As I mentioned in the beginning of this book, the idea of Surrender, although it is not explicitly named in the Bible, is central to the entirety of God's story and the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus fell on His face and prayed, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will." Matthew 26:39 Jesus surrendered to the perfect will and plan of God, the Father. In doing this great and mighty work, He fulfilled the prophetic writings of the Old Testament, entered into the climax of human history, and accomplished the work of salvation reconciling us to God, through His surrender. In His suffering, His death, resurrection, and ascension to the right hand of The Father, we are justified before God, we are adopted into His family, as sons and daughters. We are set free from the yoke of slavery that we lived under.

## **A Final Warning**

This book has been a study of the theme of surrender in the Christian faith and I hope an encouragement to assume this posture more and more in our relationship with Christ. However, I want to add a final warning. Please do not assume this call to surrender is a call to passivity. As you read the Bible, it becomes clear there is a paradox between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. As John Frame puts it, “God has saved us through Christ, by his own sovereign power. We must rely on him for all our provisions. But this fact does not allow us to be passive. There is a battle to be fought (Eph. 6:10-20), a race to be run (1 Cor. 9:24-27). We are not to “let go and let God”. Rather, as Paul says, “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:12-13). God’s sovereign action does not discourage, but rather motivates us to fight the spiritual battle, confident that ultimate victory is God’s.”<sup>39</sup> Surrendering to Christ, to His authority, to His plans for your life, is very much an active process. This will not be an easy path. It will involve tremendous effort and intention on your part, but as we have seen, it will also leave you with tremendous peace and confidence, knowing that God’s plans are so much better than your own. He is good, all the time.

## **Seek First His Kingdom**

“But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.” Matthew 6:33

The act of surrendering our lives to Christ, is the very act of seeking first His kingdom. When we posture ourselves beneath His Lordship,

and allow Him to speak into our lives, as our ultimate authority, we are allowing His kingdom to break in. This is what the kingdom of God is, it is the kingdom where Christ reigns and rules. "That kingdom is the historical program of God coming to overcome his enemies, to redeem his people, and to bring his lordship to bear on all areas of created reality."<sup>40</sup> It is my hope and prayer that you and I will find the Kingdom of God in the surrender of ourselves to the wisdom, authority and mercy of Jesus Christ. In that place alone we will find the purpose for which we were created and will therefore find freedom. It is a good place to be because He is a good God to surrender to.

What area of your life have you refused to give up control over? Who or what in your life has become so important to you, that the very thought of letting go causes you to tighten your grip? What is it that you feel you have no power to lay at the feet of Jesus? The only way we will be able to live in complete surrender to Christ, is by growing closer to Him. It is only through our relationship with Jesus that our eyes are opened to the dark corners of our heart where idolatry goes unchecked. It is only by creating space for Him to speak into that these dark corners will be exposed. And it is only through a deeply loving and personal relationship with Him that we will die to who we are so that we may live to who He is. In surrender to Jesus, He will receive glory and we will find freedom and joy. This is the purpose for which we were created.

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# About Author

Dr. Gregory Sund is an American board-certified anesthesiologist with subspecialty training in cardiothoracic anesthesiology currently working full time as a Serge missionary at AIC Kijabe Hospital in Kijabe, Kenya. Greg serves with his wife Stephanie and his three children, Ella, Piper and Binyam. Prior to serving in Kenya, Greg was the Chief of Réanimation at Kibuye Hope Hospital in Burundi and was professor of anesthesia and réanimation at Hope Africa University, based in the capital of Burundi. Prior to committing to full time service in Africa, Greg and his family lived and worked in Bellingham, WA. Greg has done numerous short term mission trips throughout Africa, including Liberia, Niger, Nigeria, Ghana, Somaliland, Ethiopia and Kenya and is passionate about teaching and discipling African physicians and anesthetists.

