

Reform the Line: Finding Purpose in Failure

Whether it's due to upbringing, past influences, or sensibilities developed over the years, I do my best to keep my eyes and ears open to truth that can help shape me into something better. That is not meant to be a pat on the back. From an early age, I have been blessed to learn from much wiser people the importance of examining everything I consume – whether literature, music, or movies. I was taught that everything I take into my mind needs to be filtered through the light of God's truth and grace.

It is that context that sets the stage for so many of my most valuable lessons. I've written about a few of them for *Rambling Ever On* already which you can read [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#). And while this particular moment of revelation was once again provided by Tolkien and his magnum opus, *The Lord of the Rings*, this time it was delivered through the film adaptation by Peter Jackson. To make any sense of this story, I must beg your indulgence for a few minutes as I do my best to provide context, and that will require a bit of storytelling and ground laying on my part. I promise it has to be done for any of this to make sense.

At the outset of *The Return of the King*, the third movie in Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, the people of Rohan are going to war against Mordor, the great evil of the world. Their spirits are high after a hard-fought battle at Helm's Deep. They had won the day through courage, determination, and the perfect timing of a wizard. The sun rose in the east and brought with it new life, new hope, and a complete routing of their enemy. Now, Gondor, their great ally to the southeast, has called for aid, and Rohan answers. The

Rohirrim – the great cavalry of the Rohan people – rides to fight in the great war of their time. With them ride Aragorn, the heir to the throne of Gondor and hero of Helm's Deep, along with Legolas Greenleaf and Gimli son of Gloin, elf and dwarf warriors of renown. The odds are not good but with these mighty warriors at their side and a little luck, perhaps they will win the day again.

That is the scene that Peter Jackson's epic conclusion to *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy presents to the audience. *The Return of the King* further stacks the deck against our heroes. On the eve of battle, Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli make the difficult decision to seek another road to Gondor, leaving the Rohirrim to ride to battle alone. It is a huge blow to the morale of the soldiers. Aragorn had given them hope. His presence inspired renewed courage. Just like that, he was gone and with him, their courage. They lose hope and they openly question the wisdom of riding to war.

Théoden, King of Rohan, has lived a long and mostly unfulfilled life. For too long, he was an ineffective leader. For too long, he sat by as his country and his people suffered. After Aragorn departs, one of Théoden's soldiers speaks aloud that which all others are thinking, "He (Aragorn) leaves because there is no hope...We cannot defeat the armies of Mordor." They know they cannot win this fight. It is at this moment of despair, that Théoden truly becomes the king he has always desired to be. He responds with such resolve that it calms the hearts of his soldiers and prepares them for what they must do. "No we cannot. But we will meet them in battle nonetheless." Théoden recognized the hopelessness of their situation, but he recognized something even more important: the absolute rightness of their task. The righteousness of it all. They would ride to war and die in war because it was the right thing to do.

In what is possibly the crowning cinematic achievement of the film, the Rohirrim arrive at the Fields of Pelennor, outside

the walls of Gondor's capital city, Minas Tirith, to find a host of enemy warriors swarming as far as the eye can see. It is a veritable ocean of orcs, trolls, and other creatures of darkness and evil. Théoden calls to his troops. He rallies them with his chant of "Death!" They charge, building speed as they take arrow after arrow, and finally, triumphantly, they break through the line of terrified orcs. They completely turn the tide of the battle. They rally the armies of Gondor. They bring hope and courage to the free peoples of Middle Earth. The orcs flee in fear knowing that they cannot stand against the righteous fury of the Rohirrim. It is a beautiful sight.

It is then that the Rohirrim realize that Mordor is stronger than they realized and another army had been held in reserve: an army of oliphaunts (giant elephants) prepared to lay waste to anyone still on the battlefield. Hope turns sour and despair sets in again.

It is easy to give up when faced with failure. It is not an uncommon thing to give our best and watch it fall apart in front of our eyes. This inevitably leaves us feeling dejected and discouraged. We have all been there. We have poured our hearts into something so important and so precious, only to see it blow away in the cold winds of failure. I would wager that most of us have experienced this in some form or fashion. Many of us are experiencing it right now.

Life can feel unfair. Things go wrong – many times in ways that leave us broken. Often, it goes bad due to our own failings or flaws, though that is a separate conversation for another day. The failure I am discussing now is a different thing altogether. We can diligently live out our purpose and calling and still see it crumble at our feet. We can know, without a doubt, that we are doing the right thing and still be crushed by disappointment. We can do the righteous thing and receive suffering, loss, and even death as our reward.

Take the real-life story of Jim Elliot and the Ecuadorian missionaries. On January 8, 1956, Jim Elliot, Peter Fleming, Ed McCully, Roger Youderian, and Nate Saint were brutally killed by warriors from the Waodani tribe in the jungles of Ecuador. This occurred after months of trying to connect with the tribe. In fact, a few days before they were martyred, they had met with a small group from the tribe and were thrilled that God had finally opened this door. They had been led to the Waodani tribe. They knew the risks, as their correspondence and writings would later attest, but they also knew that if this was the will of God, they had only one choice: obey. By any human standard, their mission was a total failure.

Their friends and family were heartbroken when they received news of the attack. Instead of hating the Waodani tribe for what they did, some of the remaining family members, Jim's wife Elizabeth in particular, chose to continue the mission. In place of fear, anger, and hatred, they went back to the Waodani and showed them courage, peace, and the love of Christ. Their ministry, and the memory of what the five young martyrs did change the Waodani people forever.

That is the lesson *The Rohirrim*, King Théoden, and *The Return of the King* had for me on my most recent viewing. Mordor was too strong and too powerful to defeat. Théoden and his soldiers knew this. They had done the unthinkable and broken the line on their first, desperate charge. For a few brief and glorious moments, they thought they had turned the tide of the battle and won the day. To the east, the line of oliphaunts and the second army from Mordor shattered that dream. Once again, they were faced with the futility of their task. They rode to Gondor's aid knowing that death would be their only reward. But they rode nonetheless. Théoden, having already found his courage, sees the new army approaching and the fear it inspires in the eyes of his men, and he stands resolute. He

quickly rallies his men and they respond as they have been trained to do from their youth. He yells the line that struck me with such force that I quietly gasped. "Reform the line! Reform the line!" The line reforms and the Rohirrim once again charge, courageously, hopelessly into the gaping maw of a much stronger army.

The outcome is irrelevant. They march because it is right. They march because it is the only honorable and noble choice left to them. I doubt we will be faced with such a choice – a life or death decision. But we are faced with difficulties throughout our lives. We serve in thankless and overlooked ministries. We sow the seed and never reap the harvest. Some of us deal with sickness and infirmity. Some of us deal with tragedy, more than it seems fair for one person to bear. We labor and sometimes, it feels in vain. That is our reality. We see this story play out in Scripture repeatedly. Moses not crossing into the Promised land. David not being allowed to build the Temple. Joseph and his continual setbacks and trials. Paul and his thorn in the flesh. All the martyrs throughout the pages of Scripture.

My takeaway from all of this is pretty simple. God does not promise us an easy road. He does not guarantee success, by any earthly definition. His plan is greater than all of that. He requires but one thing: obedience. That is a lesson I need to hear often. I need to see results. I need to see the Lord move in my church in a mighty way, but at times, it feels as if we are dying a slow and prolonged death. All of this even though I am convinced we are doing exactly what the Lord wants us to do. Perhaps it is His good will to let us serve out our days and never see tangible results. Faced with that possibility, what are our options? Do we seek greener pastures? Do we compromise in hopes that it will benefit us in the long run? Or do we "reform the line" and do exactly what we believe the Lord has for us to do?

Jim Elliot wrote this prior to his death, and though not as famous as his "He is no fool" quote, this speaks directly to the heart of what it means to be a faithful follower of Christ, "Rest in this: it is His business to lead, command, impel, send, call or whatever you want to call it. It is your business to obey, follow, move, respond, or what have you. I may no longer depend on pleasant impulses to bring me before the Lord. I must rather respond to principles I know to be right, whether I feel them to be enjoyable or not."

Failing is not enjoyable. Suffering is not enjoyable. Sometimes though, it is right and righteous. Sometimes, failure is exactly what is being asked of us. Théoden and the Rohirrim charge the new army and hope rekindles. The good guys win the day as Aragorn arrives at just the right moment with an army all his own. Théoden never sees that victory. In the midst of the battle, Théoden is mortally wounded and as he lies dying in the arms of his beloved niece, he is finally at peace. "I go to my fathers, in whose mighty company I shall not now feel ashamed." He did what was right, no matter the results. No matter the consequences. That is our calling. That is our purpose. Obey. To do the right thing no matter what. To "reform the line" as many times as it is necessary. This is no fairytale, where heroic deeds are rewarded with victory upon victory. We live in a broken and fallen world where oftentimes, God uses our brokenness and failures for His glory. We fail, but there is beauty and redemption in those failings if they flow from humble and obedient hearts.

As followers of the living God, we too will pass on from this life to the next and if we are faithful and obedient to our calling, we too will have nothing of which to be ashamed. No matter the earthly successes or failures of our lives, our ultimate reward is waiting for us in the arms of our Savior who will welcome us with the best words imaginable, "Well done my good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your

Lord!”

“He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.” – Jim Elliot

Memories (Part 3)

This section of my personal memories deals in large part (not exclusively) with ministry-related memories rather than personal ones, and covers a period of some 20 years from 1995 until the present. I include it because, number one, these are special memories in my life, and secondly, they testify to the faithfulness and leading of God as Judy and I endeavored to be obedient to our calling as believers, spouses, parents, and missionaries.

Russia

We were in the process of completing our fourth term of service in Panama when a phone call came from Brother Eugene Waddell, director of the Foreign (now International) Missions Department. Would Judy and I consider transferring from Panama to Russia? After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, God had opened doors to Russia and all the former Soviet Union countries, and there was the possibility of Free Will Baptists partnering with the Russian Baptist Union, most of whom were very close to us doctrinally. This was the spring of 1995.’’

As we finished up that term and came to the states, with plans to visit Russia with someone from the mission that year, our feeling was that we would be transferring. I picked up some Russian grammar books, a traveler's course, and other resources, thinking that would help prepare me. By the time we went in October 1995, I had learned several phrases and lots of individual words.

The trip was unforgettable. We traveled with Jimmy Aldridge (Overseas Secretary with FWB International Mission) and Galen Dunbar (board member). We met Brother Nicolai Sobolev, pastor and leader in the Russian Baptist Union, and what a wonderful host he was! We traveled from Moscow to Chelyabinsk, and then to Yekaterinburg. We attended a conference in Moscow with many Russian pastors and leaders, and a number of expatriates. What a humbling experience to listen to Russian pastors relate their experiences of time spent in prison, torture and isolation. Their faithfulness to our God came through in their testimonies. Through impossible situations, they labored to keep the church alive in Russia.

As a result of that amazing conference, and through an extended season of prayer and reflection, we reluctantly told Brother Waddell that we didn't feel the Lord's leading to go to Russia. At that time, we did not know why God said no. A year or so later, Mike and Cathy Corley were appointed to do what we were asked to do and they did it so much better than we could have!. He knew Russian and could begin ministry without the years of language study. Don't second guess God. His ways are always perfect.

Director of Field Operations

In not choosing to go to Russia, we opted to return to Panama for a fifth term. That concluded in the middle of 1999, and we moved to Nashville to be near our oldest two sons (Michael was

married and Phillip was a senior at Welch), and to enroll David in Bible College. Stateside assignment usually lasted a year or so, and involved visiting churches, speaking in mission conferences, attending associational meetings, and other mission-related opportunities. I was in western Missouri in an area-wide mission conference when one unusually warm November afternoon I received a call from James Forlines, who had become General Director of the Mission in 1998.

Bro. James told me he was considering me as a possibility for the Foreign Missions (now International Missions) administrative staff. Was I interested and willing to be considered? I could take some time and think and pray, talk it over with Judy, etc. We prayed earnestly, considered the possibilities and implications as to what it would mean for us, and in early January 2000, I called and told Bro. James that if he selected me for the position, I would accept. In mid-January, I became the Director of Field Operations.

It was my role to supervise and coordinate the efforts of our field personnel. I had an office in Nashville, and from there traveled to approximately 20 countries over the next eight years. It was truly a great adventure, a challenge beyond anything I could have imagined. Thanks to the Lord's enablement, I was a part of several initiatives that enabled us as a people to have a greater impact around the world: partnership with Bible Mission International in Central Asia, the creation of the position of Regional Director which served us well for a number of years, although it has now been eliminated, the creation of the Hanna Project, and ongoing efforts with our international Free Will Baptist family. One of my most special memories was going to Bulgaria with Clint Morgan and Tim Awtrey to survey that country as a potential field of service for our mission, and later making that recommendation to our Board. The Board approved opening Bulgaria, and today, nearly 15 years later, God is working there in a mighty way through four missionary couples and a

growing number of Bulgarian believers.

The International Fellowship of Free Will Baptist Churches, Inc

In 1992 a historic event happened for Free Will Baptists around the world. Panama was host to a consultation that would bring representatives from a number of countries where our missionaries served. Spearheaded by Dr. Melvin Worthington, Executive Secretary of the National Association of Free Will Baptists, USA, the consultation became the catalyst for an international movement.

The International Fellowship of Free Will Baptist Churches, Inc. was officially organized in 1995 in Brazil. They decided to meet every three years. I missed the 1995 and 1998 meetings in Brazil and Uruguay, respectively, but starting in 2002 (we skipped 2001 because it was so close to the terrorist attacks of 9-11), I attended every meeting through 2010, plus a number of executive committee meetings on off years as a translator-advisor, or as a member of the committee. Bro. Worthington decided to postpone the next session until 2002, and we met near Nashville, Tennessee at Camp Garner Creek. We met in Panama in 2004, France in 2007, and Oklahoma City, Oklahoma in 2010.

We'd basically meet every three years or so for a general assembly. The other years I would help coordinate an executive committee meeting, sometimes as a liaison and sometimes as a member of that committee. Working with men like Gerardo Acevedo (Uruguay), José Manuel Parrón (Spain), Luis Felipe Tijerina (México), and others remains a joy I can't adequately describe and has led to some treasured friendships as well.

Panamá, Part II

God is truly a God of surprises. I had served as Director of Field Operations at International Missions, truly loved it, and was able to visit around 20 countries during those years. However, I was having some health issues (turned out to be sleep apnea at the time, and later some more problems), and I also began to sense some unrest in my spirit that perhaps it was time to leave and find a different ministry. The Lord graciously opened doors. I would leave the position of DFO, but stay on with the Mission. The original plan was to stay involved with the International Fellowship of Free Will Baptist Churches and help countries that had received the gospel from Free Will Baptist in the United States develop plans and strategies to begin sending out their own cross-cultural missionaries. At the same time, it was felt that Judy and I should have a field ministry somewhere, so we decided to divide that role between Panama (helping the Bowermans at the seminary) and Uruguay (teaching Bible institute classes). However, by the end of 2008, Eddie's health had deteriorated, and he was going to have to return stateside immediately and go on a liver transplant waiting list. We made a trip to Panama in early January 2009 to meet with Eddie and LaRhonda Bowerman getting a crash course in the operations of the Seminary in Chame. Someone would need to assume leadership of the seminary, and it seemed that the Lord had brought us back to Panama for that hour. We served the next five-plus years in Chame, which turned out to be some of the most rewarding years of ministry. But it was not easy. The daily schedule was exhausting, on call 24/7, readjusting to the heat and humidity of Panama, and responsibilities without number. My undiagnosed health problems also left me extremely tired most of the time. Only God can be credited with giving us strength for each new day.

Judy had some flowers planted around the porch of the dorm where we were living. The beautiful small purple flowers bloomed every morning and then faded away in the heat of the

day. Judy said they reminded her of Lamentations 3:23, "They (God's mercies) are new every morning. Great is thy faithfulness." It was a reminder every morning when we walked out the door, that God is faithful and His mercy to us is new and refreshing each day.

Another blessing to us was how God sent us Ariadna and Lazaro Riesgo from Cuba to help us in the seminary! "God sent" is putting it lightly! They came and stepped in immediately relieving us of many of the duties we had.

Also, the churches in Panama were seeing the importance of the seminary and taking ownership. Pastors were willing to dedicate two days a week to teach classes and this was essential. We had students in three different years so it was necessary to have three classes simultaneously. Not only was it a great help to us but the students learned from seasoned pastors. Another benefit was the pastors caught the vision and shared it with their congregations.

It is hard to believe that we're talking about nearly 20 years here. From a middle-aged couple with children still at home to watching those same children grow up, go off to college (all went to Free Will Baptist Bible College, now Welch College), meet their future spouse, get married, and start their own family. Now we're grandparents, several times over, but "greatly blessed, highly favored." As the old saying goes, "how time has flown!"

Bethany

A highlight of 2014 for us was our trip to Peru to see David, Bethany, and their three children; Isaac, Jude, and Naomi. Peru is a beautiful country, Lima is a fascinating city, and being with the kids was special. We actually had them to ourselves for a few days while David and Bethany went away to

have a short vacation and celebrate their 10th anniversary. The next time we saw them was just before Christmas 2014 when they flew in to spend their Christmas break with the Lytles Bethany's family in the Huntsville Alabama area. How could I ever forget the night Bethany told us she might have cancer? She didn't feel well from the time they arrived, and kept getting worse. Judy and I were to have gone to Panama on January 7 for a special "Passing the Baton" meeting that weekend in which International Missions was turning the work there over entirely to the National church. Because Bethany was feeling so bad, Judy decided not to go and went down to Huntsville, AL with Sheila Sass. I was to go on to Panama, but that very morning David called to say that cancer had spread throughout Bethany's body. I got the message en route to the airport, so I canceled my trip, went down to Alabama that morning straight to the hospital. Bethany went home to be with Jesus the next morning around 2:30.

Epilogue

I told one of the editors of Rambling Ever On that the Epilogue would be relatively short. We left Panama as missionaries assigned to that field in 2014 and retired from the Mission in June 2015. Growing health concerns led to an MRI which revealed that I have Intracranial Hypotension, a spinal fluid loss, which causes the brain to sag and, in my case, led to severe headaches, especially when preaching, lack of balance which caused me to not be able to walk a straight line, and even speed up, trip, and fall. To that, we could add lethargy, slurred speech, and delayed reactions that at times made it dangerous to drive. God has been merciful, and though it took a while, we've learned that getting horizontal and resting every day has helped tremendously.

Judy and I have both had a number of health issues, mostly minor, and for that we praise the Lord. It's all part of the

aging process. Speaking of aging, our pastor at Cofer's Chapel, Allen Pointer, asked us to serve on staff at the church part time and work with the senior adults and to begin a ministry to internationals. God has allowed us to start a Hispanic ministry, and we now have around 30 Spanish-speaking folks to whom we minister, and whom we're seeking to fully integrate into the life of our church. It's also exciting to get to know our seniors better, especially since we are a part of the group!

At this stage of life, watching our grandkids be born and grow is truly one of life's greatest blessings. We have nine, with another on the way.

The Goodness of Effort

About a year ago today, the wheels were just about to come off completely. How do I know? Well, for starters, Facebook memories. The date is June 9th, 2017. The picture is of my wife, Kate, her mom, and our newborn daughter Analeigh in front of a bus at the Tokorozawa train station. There are half-smiles painted on their faces because that's...just what you do when you're getting a picture taken. What's not visible, though, are the struggles that we were already enduring. The severe depression, the blindness that had crept into Kate's right eye, the misdiagnosis of her having a parasite. The three girls were getting ready to go to the Haneda airport to fly to the US for two weeks to seek treatment for Kate's vision. The same two weeks that would see the beginning of my three-year-old daughter Audrey's battle against multiple severe illnesses in Japanese hospitals. It would be months later before she would be fully, and even miraculously, recovered.

Our first two years in the greater Tokyo area were mostly defined by something that was completely outside of our control. Or rather, our time was defined by an increasingly difficult set of circumstances that removed from us the illusion that we were ever in control to begin with. Somehow this knowledge, living through a storm like this, has changed the way that we view life in a profound way. Most of the time it's hard for us to pin down exactly what that is. One element of our new perspective is the simple knowledge that things can change so drastically and so quickly. That our health can decline rapidly and at any moment. These things can shake us, even unnerve us, if thought of outside of the context of a Sovereign God who reigns over it all. Thankfully, we trust in a God who "sits enthroned over the Flood" (Psalm 29:10).

In the past year, especially in the past six months or so, my wife and I have been mulling over the idea of "success." It seems as though, in our culture, the ones who are elevated and admired the most are those select entrepreneurs who not only have big ideas but who also have concepts that somehow see them through to grand fruition. What is their secret to this "success"? What bit of hidden wisdom might be found in their biographies and inspirational thoughts? And these ideas have other, even more implicit questions for our own work: How do I measure success in what I do, or in what I aspire to do, in light of these, what our culture might consider the pinnacle of excellence?

In the introduction to his book "Every Good Endeavor: Connecting Your Work to God's Work", Tim Keller writes about a short story of J.R.R. Tolkien's called "Leaf by Niggle". In the story, Niggle, a painter, obsesses over one particular painting. In his mind, he sees a beautiful landscape with a tree and very much desires to see it come to life on canvas. Keller writes,

So he worked on his canvas, 'putting a touch here, and

rubbing out a patch there,' but he never got much done. There were two reasons for this. First it was because he was the 'sort of painter who can paint leaves better than trees. He used to spend a long time on a single leaf...' trying to get the shading and the sheen and the dewdrops on it just right. So no matter how hard he worked, very little actually showed up on the canvas itself. The second reason was his 'kind heart.' Niggle was constantly distracted by doing things his neighbors asked him to do for them.

Later on in the story, Niggle, out on yet another task for a neighbor, gets sick and gets ready to die, his painting far from finished. "'Oh, dear!' said poor Niggle, beginning to weep, 'And it's not even finished!'" After his death, the painting of the leaf is eventually noticed and put in the town museum, viewed by a few people in the years to follow. "But," as Keller continues, "the story does not end there."

After death Niggle is put on a train toward the mountains of the heavenly afterlife. At one point on his trip, he hears two Voices. One seems to be Justice, the severe voice, which says that Niggle wasted so much time and accomplished so little in life. But the other, gentler voice ('though it was not soft'), which seems to be Mercy, counters that Niggle has chosen to sacrifice for others, knowing what he was doing. As a reward, when Niggle gets to the outskirts of the heavenly country, something catches his eye. He runs to it—and there it is: 'Before him stood the Tree, his Tree, finished; its leaves opening, its branches growing and bending in the wind that Niggle had so often felt or guessed, and yet had so often failed to catch. He gazed at the Tree, and slowly he lifted his arms and opened them wide. 'It is a gift!' he said.

Keller then continues, "The world before death—his old country—had forgotten Niggle almost completely, and there his

work had ended unfinished and helpful to only a very few. But in his new country, the permanently real world, he finds that his tree, in full detail and finished, was not just a fancy of his that had died with him. No, it was indeed part of the True Reality that would live and be enjoyed forever.”

Finally, Keller writes,

If the God of the Bible exists, and there is a True Reality beneath and behind this one, and this life is not the only life, then every good endeavor, even the simplest ones, pursued in response to God’s calling, can matter forever. That is what the Christian faith promises. ‘In the Lord, your labor is not in vain,’ writes Paul in the first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 15, verse 58. He was speaking of Christian ministry, but Tolkien’s story shows how this can ultimately be true of all work. Tolkien had readied himself, through Christian truth, for very modest accomplishment in the eyes of the world.

The story of “Leaf by Niggle” cuts me right to my core. As I was recounting the story to my wife just yesterday, I started to choke back tears. Even now, as I think about it more, the tears yet come. I imagine myself as Niggle, having passed on, yet seeing with new eyes the fulfillment of dreams unrealized. And now, as the kingdom of Christ already begins to break into the present, with new eyes I can already see the great value of sleeping on a rough cot beside the bed of your sick daughter. I can see the restoration of time spent changing diapers or a child’s vomit-soaked bed-sheets. I can see the nobility in a fight to the death against a cancer diagnosis. And I can rest in the freedom of the knowledge that even if plans fail and the ship of ambition meets a fiery end on the rocky cliffs, there is inherent goodness in the effort anyway. Though life can often be unpleasant and suffering is always looming around the corner, there is still deep good in

cultivating, living, and even enjoying life. Even the simplest things, if done in Christ and for the glory of God, are of deep value and worth.

I've often thought about the great Judgment that is to come, when all of the secrets of men will be brought to light by the omniscient, just Judge, Christ. His grading scale will be based on the heart that was behind the work. Were we producing as a result of being connected to the Vine? And the "last will be first, and the first last" (Matthew 20:16). Who will be the first? Most likely not those we have called such, or else this statement isn't striking at all. I like to imagine at times all those who have served in ages past, caring for the sick and the elderly, or sweating away under intense physical labor, or even pushing a broom in a small restaurant in the middle of nowhere. But if they did it with a heart of service to Christ, who is to say that these, forgotten by the world, won't be the first in the kingdom to come? We will all find out together.

Five Ways to Wage War on the Ego

"He must [by the very nature of things] increase, but I must decrease." (John the Baptist)

One of the most clever things I've read in any fiction work is in *The Screwtape Letters* with the uncle advising the nephew to get his Christian to realize he's being humble because then – voilà! – he's automatically prideful. Countless Christians I've spoken to have picked up on this irony in joke form by

declaring, as if they are the first to ever do so, “I’m so proud of my humility!”

I start with that because I fully confess that by sharing thoughts about how not to be prideful that when people put them into practice, they can absolutely be proud of their effort and ruin the whole thing. Humility and pride are so unique and tricky that way.

So no, I’m not trying to advocate ways to appear humble while you get a big head in your heart of hearts. But the Bible at various times and in various ways tells us to be humble. So I think a strategy is prudent. Here are five to consider:

1. Keep your good deeds private

I have spoken to this one before. Yet Facebook is such a constant assault on this, I find myself wanting to shout this from the rooftops. Making your good deeds known to others can be (and probably is) in direct violation of Jesus’ command to not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. Yet on social media, we act like this isn’t an issue. We brag about something we accomplished, the likes and affirmations come pouring in and it all seems like a normal part of our culture.

Granted, I will not cast stones on this because I have learned, like others, how to creatively do it where it doesn’t look like bragging. Just post a picture of some great deed you are doing. People love pictures, right? Then you don’t have to brag with words. But people still know how great you are. Yes, I’ve been there.

Until we get to the place where we are secure enough in our identity as a servant of Christ who works for an audience of one, we will live in direct disobedience to Christ’s command to keep our good works private. Especially on social media.

And myself included.

2. Overwhelm complaining with thanksgiving

Here is one I really struggle with. My wife and closest friends will confirm this. Everyone on Twitter is an idiot. Our extended Winter this year is just the worst. Chicago traffic turns me into an ogre of rage and criticism. Even the woman who leads the workout videos my wife does is not safe from my ire, even though she is a successful woman, in much better shape than me, and doesn't deserve my insults.

It's all an ugly manifestation of how proud I am. Because I'm either only thinking of myself or I'm putting myself above others. By contrast, outside of November, my attitude of thankfulness is anemic. Yet of the two things, only one is commanded as something we are to do in all circumstances.

Criticism is at times warranted in Christianity. And we all need to vent at times. I am not advocating to avoid it completely. I just think some of us could stand to have our comments and actions of thanksgiving outnumber our complaints and insults about 10 to 1, or some similar percentage. Maybe getting specific will help: Trying to open our day by thanking for ten straight minutes or by handwriting thank you notes often or by showing a person how thankful you are with a simple gesture. It will choke our pride at a very sensitive point.

3. Associate with people who know more than you

The Bible warns that knowledge puffs us up. This can be seen so clearly when people attend college or grad school or seminary, or even when they are educated in any way on any subject. If we are knowledgeable in some way and proud as a

result, it makes sense to me that exposure to those who know more than we do will help keep us in a more sober and humble state of mind.

A few years ago I began studying textual criticism, the art-science of trying to scour through nearly 6,000 Greek manuscripts and countless other sources to determine the original wording of the New Testament books. I have learned quite a bit about it. But I also belong to a Facebook page on the topic, where some of the world's foremost experts post. And I have to admit: they can talk circles around me and some have written hundreds and hundreds of pages on it. And some of what they say in their books I do not understand.

It is similar with the languages and cultures around us. I have little doubt it is easy to get frustrated with how other people think and behave and what language they speak when it is different from ours because it annoys us. But God taught me a few years ago that exposure to and appreciation for what I don't know keeps me from being proud of what I do. So when people speak Russian on the Chicago bus, by God's grace I hope this reminder of how big the world is and how small my knowledge is will keep me humble.

4. Associate with people who have less than you

I have also written about this before, but Jesus once taught to throw parties for the crippled and blind instead of for your own family and friends. In that same chapter, Jesus talks about people making excuses as to why they cannot follow him and then concludes the chapter by saying that if anyone wants to follow him they have to forsake everything. What I take from that is that our richness in material possessions and relationship cause us to forget how badly we need God. And the antidote is to rub shoulders with people who do not have much in the way of material possessions and relationship.

Why? Because part of our social makeup as humans is to become like whoever we are closest to. This is why my dad always told me “You are who your friends are.” And so I think Jesus wants us to learn humility from those who live humbly by little to no choice in the matter.

5. Daily choose forgiveness over bitterness and vindication.

This one is crucial because it is a potent weapon against the “proud of your humility” threat. If you are forgiving because of how much Christ forgave you, as he taught in Matthew 18:21-35 and other places, then you are not confused by how bad a person you are. And yet you are not wallowing in your sinfulness but being proactive in trying to live out the grace that has been given.

Bitterness and vindication are the opposite. They take no account of how bad we as the victim are and do nothing productive or proactive in living out grace or mercy. Retaliating also manifests a spirit that trusts self over God, who vows that revenge only belongs to him.

To be clear, when a person is wronged in the worst ways, I will be careful (especially soon after the event) in counseling them on how and when to forgive. Yet, in reading stories like Joseph in Genesis and Corrie Ten Boom in more modern times, I think there is an authority in their words to teach that even those abused in the worst ways can forgive by the grace of the Christian God. And the worst act of injustice in human history – an innocent man being humiliated, tortured and killed for the very people who killed him – is the message and heart of this humble way of living.

So by trying to live out biblical forgiveness daily (which is indeed more a process than an event in my experience because I often think “I forgive that person” and then the memories come back one day and I have to do it again) I will disintegrate my

ego. Because I can't think on and react to God's grace and be proud at the same time. And by forgiving because I've been forgiven, that is what I am doing.

What do you think? Comments are welcomed below.

Memories (Part 2)

As I continue to recall memories, I should point out that these are selective and representative. There are many more, but these stand out to illustrate the faithfulness of God in both good and bad times. (Read Part One [here](#).)

The Sweet Fellowship of College

"Yesterday, Today, Forever" was a medley of songs popular during my college years at the Free Will Baptist Bible College, [1. Welch College now.] that we dorm students would sing during informal gatherings. One evening, around 1970 or 1971, as the students frequently did, we'd gathered in front of the sliding curtain opening into the dining hall (where the student lounge and later "Common Grounds" were) about five minutes to six, and as was often the case, we started to sing:

Yesterday, Today, Forever Jesus is the same.

All may change, but Jesus never, glory to His name!

Glory to His name, glory to His name.

All may change but Jesus never, glory to His name!

Precious name, oh how sweet, hope of earth and joy of Heaven.

Precious name, oh how sweet, hope of earth and joy of Heaven.

Heaven is better than this, praise God what joy and bliss

*Walking down streets of purest gold, living in a land where
we'll never grow old.*

Heaven is better than this, praise God what joy and bliss

*I like Bible College down here, but Heaven is better than,
Heaven is better than*

Heaven is better than this.

This world is not my home, I'm just a passing through

My treasures are laid up, somewhere beyond the blue.

The angels beckon me to Heaven's golden shore,

And I can't feel at home in this world any more.

More, more about Jesus, more, more about Jesus

*More of His saving fullness see, more of His love who died for
me.*

It's me, it's me, oh Lord, standing in the need of prayer

It's me, it's me oh Lord, standing in the need of prayer.

*Sweet hour of prayer, sweet hour of prayer, that calls me from
a world of care*

*And bids me at my Father's throne make all my wants and wishes
known.*

*In seasons of distress and grief, my soul has often found
relief*

*And oft escaped the tempter's snare, by thy return, sweet hour
of prayer.*

With a key word, one song would flow into the next:
name...name, Heaven...Heaven,

This...this, more...more, and prayer...prayer. That particular night, though, as we approached the final song, there seemed to be a holy hush, a sense of God's Spirit. The curtain came open well before the end. The dining hall hostess stood there smiling. She didn't hush our singing and call for someone to ask the blessing right away. Instead, she joined us as we finished out the medley with the the beautiful and poignant "Sweet Hour of Prayer," and then we prayed and went into the dining hall to eat. A beautiful moment, a precious memory, which to me highlights the camaraderie, the sweet fellowship, the closeness of our student body during our unforgettable college years.

First Visit to Cuba

It was the summer of 1986. We had just come home from our second term in Panama to begin stateside assignment. Brother Eugene Waddell, who had recently been named as General Director of Free Will Baptist Foreign Missions, called me, and asked me if I would go with him to Cuba to be his interpreter/translator. I felt greatly honored to be asked to go. Over the years, we had met a number of our FWB people from Cuba who migrated to Panama en route to the United States. I'd heard so much about the country and the church there. In addition, visits from the US to Cuba were very infrequent, and no one from the Mission office had gone in nearly thirty

years.

It was one of the most unforgettable weeks of my life. We were in Pinar del Río, at the site where the seminary had operated for almost 20 years up until the time of the Cuban revolution. Since that time it had been closed, and the government would not allow the seminary to reopen. Eugene Waddell spoke several times during the youth camp we were attending; the FWB Church in Cuba was still permitted to use the facility for camps and conventions. Never have I seen such anointing or heard such pertinent messages as those he brought that week. His messages from the book of Daniel, and how God used this young man and his three friends as witnesses in a foreign, hostile culture, tremendously blessed and encouraged our Cuban brothers and sisters, especially the youth.

We laughed, we cried, we worshipped, and we forged friendships that would last for a lifetime and into eternity. There were also strategic discussions and the working out of a viable strategy for the Mission to again become involved in the life of the Cuban church, but in a healthy way that would honor our brothers and not create unhealthy dependency. What has resulted in Cuba these past 30 years owes much to the wisdom God gave to Bro. Waddell and Bro. Gilberto Díaz, who was president of the Cuban Association.

The 1989 US Invasion of Panama

Things had been hot and chaotic in Panama since 1987, when frequent demonstrations started taking place against the dictatorship that had ruled the country since October 1968. Then, in early 1988, the U.S. froze Panamanian assets in an effort to force dictator Manuel Antonio Noriega to step down, and charged him with drug trafficking and other illegal activities. Banks closed, and we had difficulty getting money to even buy groceries. Things calmed down a bit, but then in

May, 1989, after Noriega had the presidential election annulled when it was evident that the opposing candidate had one, violence erupted, and images of Guillermo Endara and Guillermo "Billy" Ford beaten and bloodied by Noriega's thugs flashed across the television screen. The tension grew almost daily.

Judy shares the following memory:

Since public transportation was so difficult during this time, one afternoon, I decided to take our friend Lola to a bus stop closer to her house so she wouldn't have to wait for hours. We were chatting in the car as we arrived to the area called San Miguelito. Suddenly, we were in the middle of a political demonstration. The traffic was totally stopped. I looked around. There was a river of cars in front of us, behind us and on both sides. The angry mob was shouting, "Kill the Gringos, kill the Gringos." There was no escape. The car had tinted windows, thank the Lord, because one protester approached my car and laid his AK-47 right on the hood and continued to shout! Lola was praying like there was no tomorrow and I was saying a few prayers myself. Just as suddenly as we found ourselves in this horribly frightening situation, it seemed like God parted the Red Sea. That river of cars opened up and I didn't wait to see if the traffic light was red or green. I gunned it and we were out of there safe and sound. Only God could do that!

There were a couple of coup attempts to have Noriega step down, which failed and resulted in Noriega's men being killed. October and November slowly went, the tension growing, and no one knowing what might happen. Noriega shook a machete in the face of the United States, and declared Panama to be in a state of war. It was now late December, Christmas season, stores crowded with customers and their Christmas merchandise.

December 20, 12:00 a.m.: My family and I – our three boys were there with us, ages 14, 12, and 8 – will never forget

“Operation Just Cause.” The bombing, the strong military presence for weeks that followed, the terrible Friday, December 22 following the Wednesday a.m. invasion; a day of looting as people ransacked the stores, including those nearby us, and carried things up the street in front of our house. Everyone was concerned that once the stores were wiped out, looters would start breaking into homes. That night, by common consent, believers set a time to pray and call upon the Lord for His protection. I’ll never forget when the prayer time ended, at that very moment, we heard the first U.S. helicopters passing over the neighborhoods, and heard that a curfew had been instituted! We were able to sleep in peace, in spite of the uncertainty. The next day, we saw the first troops, patrolling the city. Things began to quickly calm down.

Parents’ Home-going

These memories, though separated by over 25 years, have special significance: the passing of our parents, their departing this earth on their Heavenly journey. My dad died in 1981, after a year and a half struggle with pancreatic and liver cancer. He was not quite 70, and I was only 31 when he left us. We are thankful he lived longer than the doctors’ had predicted, and enjoyed several months relatively pain-free. Judy’s mom, Lillian Hovis, left us in 1993, at age 68. She had taken care of Judy’s dad, who had lived in declining health for some time, when she was stricken with pancreatic and liver cancer in 1992. In less than a year, she was gone. That left Judy’s dad, who lived for almost three years after his wife of 46 years was taken. He passed in 1996, at home. My mom suffered from Alzheimer’s for more than 8 years, before the Lord took her home in 2007.

These very selective memories, spread over a period of 30 plus years, show God's love, faithfulness, protection, and comfort. From a precious, unforgettable moment of fellowship and camaraderie, to the Holy Spirit's mighty working among believers in Cuba, to God's hand of protection during a time of uncertainty and danger, to His comfort as we said our earthly goodbyes to those we love, He was there!

Here Where Dogs Bite and Bees Sting: Part Two

How the Corruption of Free Will Has Affected Nature

In the [first part](#) of this three-part series, I talked about how we corrupted God's gift of free will by choosing to sin, to turn away from Him. This began the history of the curse of sin. One of the results of the curse of sin is that all of nature is now imperfect. Much to our chagrin, everything is now dying. And as I mentioned in Part One, many of us see this as all God's fault.

C.S. Lewis tells about the death of his mother, a turning point in his early life. He recalls praying for a miraculous resurrection. When none of this took place, he completely rejected that there could possibly be a good God.

An older Lewis conceded that the subject is much more complicated than he had thought as a young man. In *Mere*

Christianity, he wondered "...How had I got this idea of just and unjust?...(*Mere Christianity*, 40). What was I comparing this universe with when I called it unjust?" It is this thought that convicted Lewis of the over-simplicity of his atheistic beliefs. A little further on in *Mere Christianity* he says it is also an oversimplification to say, yes, there is a good God in heaven and that God has made it so everything is all right.

Evil does exist in both man and nature and God obviously doesn't quell all of it. It is not that it is too powerful for God or even that it is equal with Him. It is not like there is not an equal, dualistic battle where good and evil do perpetual battle with one another with evil continually limiting God. The story of Scripture shows that the evil forces of darkness are a much lesser thing which God is in the process of conquering. But Scripture also makes it clear that evil is still exceedingly powerful. And it is this exceedingly powerful thing that has infected both man and nature.

Pain is a Grace

As far as the natural, physical order, I don't think pain and suffering are the main culprits. Pain and suffering may be unpleasant but they aren't evil things in and of themselves. They are indicators that something evil is happening. In fact, when you experience pain you are often experiencing a sort of gift. In *Where Is God When It Hurts?* Philip Yancey describes "The Gift Nobody Wants" first thing. He says, "pain gets bad press...we should see poems, statues and hymns to pain." He says, "Pain is not an afterthought, or God's great goof...it reveals a marvelous design that serves our bodies well." He tells how his close friend Paul Brand, a doctor at a leper clinic, observed firsthand that without being able to feel pain lepers are unable to detect when evil is happening to their bodies and therefore do not know to do something about it. This is the major reason for many of the injuries incurred by leprosy (*Where is God When It Hurts?* 26-31).

And Our Suffering is Not Divine Punishment

The imperfection in nature that instigates the pain is sometimes seen as a punishment from God. Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote the book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* while watching his own son die of a very rare disease. Many of the conclusions found in the book are probably wrong, but he does provide some good insights. For instance, Kushner relates going to the home of a couple who had just lost a child. When he arrived at their home the very first words out of their mouth were, "You know, Rabbi, we didn't fast last Yom Kippur" (*When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, 8). In their opinion, they were only getting from God what they deserved. They believed that God was punishing them for doing what they were supposed to do.

The story of Job and his friends probably came to mind when I was talking about viewing suffering as a punishment for a sin, didn't it? They (the "friends") certainly said a lot of interesting, thought-provoking things, but they were just saying the same wrong things over and over again. They would have us believe that when we hurt, we really are being punished for some sin. That really has nothing to do with it as far as we are concerned. We feel pain at all because we live in an imperfect world. It's as simple as that.

Living Your Faith in This World That Hurts

The trick is not allowing the existence of imperfection of the natural order to play a decisive role in our personal level of faith. That is, our faith in and on God should not lower or become non-existent when something bad or even a bunch of bad somethings takes place in our lives. Job was faithful to God despite a bunch of really bad somethings coming into his life in an apparently brief amount of time. That is not to say he never expressed anger and frustration at what God was doing to him. He did. That is not to say he did not often demand an answer from God. He did that too. His level of faith on God

simply did not depend on life being good. Throughout the book, Job makes it very clear that he wasn't a masochist who enjoyed the pain, but he also made it clear that he was fully willing to accept that both good and evil came into the lives of those who love God.

God, the one friend who knew what He was talking about, made a huge statement of His amazing knowledge and sovereignty in the last three chapters of Job. His words here reveal a God that is very opposite the weak God claimed by so many. One of these individuals is the aforementioned Kushner. I mentioned that Kushner comes to several wrong conclusions in his book. Here's one of them: Toward the end of his book he concludes that God "is limited in what he can do by laws of nature and by the evolution of human nature and human moral freedom" (*When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, 134). Yancey comments on this statement by Kushner in *Where is God When It Hurts*: "God's speech at the end of Job is one of the...reasons I cannot agree...Job 38-41 contains as impressive a description of God's power as you'll find anywhere in the Bible." God is not limited by evil, by our free will, by anything. But we are. We are limited by many things. And in our limited understanding, we assume that He really is limited. In so doing we make the God of our hearts and minds a weak God.

The Unpleasant Providence

No, God does not punish us by inflicting disease and hardship upon us but uses these things to reveal His glory. Upon first seeing a blind man, the disciples asked Jesus, who sinned to make this man blind, the man himself or his parents? Jesus replied that neither had sinned but that the man had been born blind so that God's glory could be displayed. He then proceeded to manifest the glory of God by miraculously healing the man. Other people who have experienced bitter providence come to mind.

I think of Carolyn Martin. Carolyn is a friend of my family who was born with severe Cerebral Palsy. Martin spent much of her early life seeking to find meaning out of her lot in life. Despite being a church-going person for most of her life, it was only as an adult she found the joy in God that gave her true meaning. In her words: "My pain was washed away by God's deep and soothing sea of love for me" (*I Can't Walk So I'll Learn to Dance*, 239). She came to see that God was using her handicap for His glory. She was able to get a college education and to thereafter become a published writer, inspiring others with physical limitations through her story. Her story is a message of God's grace.

I think of Richard Wurmbrand. It was as a religious prisoner under communist guard that pastor Wurmbrand saw the true face of evil. The tortures he endured and witnessed are too horrible to contemplate. He recounted how he heard one of his torturers say, "I thank God, in whom I don't believe, that I have lived to this hour when I can express all the evil in my heart."³³ His story is a story of God's providence. After his final release, Wurmbrand spread his story throughout the world and started *Voice of the Martyrs*. His story has become an inspiration to millions of Christians throughout the world.

And these are just two examples. There are many of them. Many the best of these examples are in God's Word.

But although He is working His plan through, this imperfect world is not ideal to God. All of history is His working toward renewal. In the last part of this series, we will look at that.

Read Part Three [here](#).

Grace Is

Grace is, according to the Sunday School answer, “unmerited favor.”

The problem with this comes with a misunderstanding of “favor.” We would probably agree that grace is unmerited: underserved, not earned, etc. But favor causes problems.

Favor would be getting a promotion and salary increase at work. Favor would be avoiding the car accident by inches. Favor would be having a healthy baby.

And, while I think these are blessings that God allows because He is gracious, I believe God does not lay aside His graciousness if I’m overlooked for the promotion, if I am involved in a devastating car wreck, or if my son is born with a disability.

I misunderstand God’s favor as “what I want” rather than what He wants. I would never choose the hard road. Ever. Not even once. God chooses if for me because it’s what is best. And the hard road in His will is also His favor.

Think about it in terms of our heroes in the Bible. Was God NOT gracious when Joseph was sold into slavery? Was He NOT gracious when Joseph was wrongly imprisoned? Knowing what God does through these misfortunes of Joseph, I can clearly see His grace; by allowing Joseph to endure these difficulties, God promotes him and saves the Hebrews.

But it’s not as easy for me to proclaim Him as gracious in the midst of one of life’s messy chapters when I don’t know the whole story.

Another problem with how we discuss and define grace is when we contrast it with judgment. God is a God of both. One is not laid aside while He picks up the other. Jesus demonstrates this for us perfectly.

Was it gracious of Jesus to cleanse the temple and throw out the money changers? Would we call it grace when Jesus called the Pharisees "brood of vipers" or "white-washed tombs" (Matthew 23)? Jesus did not take off His attribute of grace so He could wear His judge's robe. Grace involves truth, or it's not grace. If Jesus would have ignored the religious leaders' Jewish elitism and religious hypocrisy, He would not have shown them grace.

As a parent, this makes sense to me. The Bible tells me that God disciplines those He loves as a father disciplines his child (see Proverbs 3:12 and Hebrews 12:6). Disciplining my child is an act of grace. Further, to NOT discipline my child is to "hate" him (Proverbs 13:24). If I only show what my kids would call "favor" towards them, the results would be disastrous. Kids' ideas of what is favorable are not always what is best. So my "unfavorable" discipline, food choice, rules, conversations, etc. is for their overall good. It's ungracious to make every choice based on what they would consider favorable.

I have seen a trend in statements such as, "If I am wrong (about this issue), I want to err on the side of grace." Grace is never on the same side as falsehood. Grace is always connected to truth. If it's true that child abuse is wrong, then it's not gracious to ignore it or accept it just in case it's okay. (Of course it's not okay.) If it's true that that having sex with someone who is not my spouse is wrong, then it's not correct to ignore or accept it in the name of grace. Having laws against child abuse and punishment for abusers are gracious acts in that these are correct. Showing grace to an unfaithful spouse could include civil agreements in the dividing of assets in divorce, custodial arrangements, and

forgiveness—but not acceptance and tolerance of the behavior. It would be ungracious to say, “Just sleep with whomever your heart tells you to. Because if I’m wrong about wanting you to be faithful to me, then I would rather err on the side of grace.” Ludicrous!

By His grace I am saved through faith, and not by things I do, or I would certainly boast about how good I am (Ephesians 2:8-9). Grace is about what He has done, what He does, and what He will do. Grace is unmerited favor, as long as I don’t misunderstand or limit what “favor” actually means.

The Spoken Unspoken Prayer Request

“I have an unspoken.”

Then why did you just speak it?

The “unspoken” prayer request (pause and meditate on that phrase for a few minutes) has bothered me for years. If I have such a sensitive, secretive topic, then I can pray for it without the announcement that I have one. If I do not think I should share it with a group of people, then I shouldn’t. If it is a request that is burdensome enough to share with fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, then I need to say what it is. I don’t have to share all the details to ask for prayer. I can ask my small group (Sunday School class, Life Group, Connection Group, Whatever-Clever-Name-You-Want Group) to pray about a big decision that I have to make. This is not the “unspoken” I am referring to. I am talking about those generic “I have an unspoken” comments. What is their purpose?

I liken this to a child who is supposed to keep a secret. A true secret-keeper will not give others the indication that he or she has knowledge of the secret. But as all parents have experienced, the first time you tell your child a secret, he has to advertise that he knows something that others do not know. This advertisement, this announcement of the secret knowledge, is too revealing. In essence, it is no longer a complete secret once people know that there is one being kept.

So why ask for prayer for an unspoken reason (that's actually not unspoken)?

Could it be pride?

"This is so important, this information I am privy to, that I can't share it with anyone."

"This very personal issue is so private, that I can't tell you about it."

"But that doesn't mean you can't 'pray' about this thing you don't know about. Because God knows."

It's true that God knows. It's also true that none of the rest of us have to know about it. If it is wise to not share about the request, then don't. Sometimes, I think it's good to just be quiet.

Is it really God-honoring to share an unspoken request?

Request sharing should be a time of honesty, authenticity, and brokenness between like-minded, sinning disciples of Christ. Perhaps the sinning saints are hurting because we are sojourners and living in a hostile world brings trouble. ("In this world you will have trouble," Jesus warned.) Perhaps the purpose is based in praise, and we see a piece of home here on earth because loving God and loving others will bring blessing. Perhaps we share to adore the One who is redeeming us for a greater purpose. I don't think unspoken requests accomplish any of these.

Do we see any examples in the Bible of the unspoken request?

Prayers in the Bible are specific: prayers that the gospel would be shared boldly; prayers for protection and safety and holiness; prayers of thankfulness. However, even the prayers recorded in the Bible do not share all the minutia of every request. We are even instructed to avoid wordiness and repetition (Matthew 6:7). Imagine Paul (or Peter or James or John, etc.) writing, “Dear Brothers and Sisters, I have an unspoken.” It seems strange.

These are only three reasons why I see no benefit in sharing unspoken requests: they are often rooted in pride; they do not serve a God-honoring purpose; and there is no biblical precedent.

What do you think? Am I missing something?

Peter, Walking on Water, and the Trust of a Drowning Man

I’ve been thinking a lot about Peter and trust. Not faith necessarily, but trust. And it all stems from a thought I had when I read the story found in Matthew 14:22-33.

My guess is, most of you know the story and know it well. It is a favorite for Sunday School teachers. Preachers love it as well. There is a lot to be gleaned from the story of Jesus walking on the water. There are the various dynamics at play: fear, doubt, faith, and trust. There is Jesus, walking on the wind-swept waters in a display of power that rivals almost any miracle recorded in Scripture. There are the disciples, cowering in the boat, terrified of the “ghost” that is approaching them. There is Peter, touched by the presence of

Jesus, trusting enough to take a step of faith out of the boat. And then there is Peter, overcome by his fear of the winds and waves, sinking into the water.

This most recent time I encountered the story, I was struck with a moment that I have never really noticed before, and it dramatically altered how I view this story.

In my experience, Jesus walking on the water has always been used to teach about doubt and faith. There they were, sitting in the boat, surrounded by the storm, and they see him – Jesus, walking on the water and coming their way. Let me repeat that. In the middle of a storm the disciples see Jesus, their teacher, literally walking on the water. By this point, they had already witnessed various miracles. They knew Jesus had power over the natural world. They had to – they had just seen him multiply the fish and the bread to feed thousands. And now, here he is, walking on the water as if on land. Yet they are still terrified of the winds, the waves, and the “ghost” walking towards them on the water.

And then he calls to them with words of comfort and peace. At this point in his spiritual walk, Peter’s words were far bolder than his actions, so he asks Jesus to command him to walk out to him. Jesus simply says, “Come.” Peter then does something that should both inspire and shame all of us: He steps out on the water and walks towards Jesus. That is faith. That is complete trust in Jesus. I am moved and my spirit is piqued when I read that. Peter knew the sea, it was his life and livelihood. He knew that man was not made to walk on the water. But he saw and heard Jesus and he trusted fully.

Then he took his eyes off Jesus and focused on the storm. This is the moment in the story that most teachers make their big point. And it is a very good point. We should always keep our eyes on Jesus. We should take him at his word. We should trust completely. We should have that mustard seed faith and move whatever mountains are in our way.

We don't live in that reality though. Most of us don't, at least. I have never moved a mountain and I don't know of anyone who has. We struggle with trusting fully and living by faith. We are more like the other disciples, huddling in the boat waiting to see what happens.

So the contrast is simple: We should be like Peter before he took his eyes off the Lord. We should not be like Peter who allowed fear to guide his actions. That is a good lesson. It is a simple, yet powerful truth. But I see another kind of trust in that passage.

I see Peter sinking deep into the stormy waters, knowing death was quickly coming to take him. I see Peter realizing that his faith was not strong enough to continue walking on that water. That could have been the end of the story. But that is not how Jesus let it end. As Peter is flailing in the water, he calls out to Jesus, "Lord, save me!" Jesus walks to Peter and takes his hand. Peter could have looked at that hand and thought to himself, "Thanks but no thanks Jesus. I don't see how it's possible for you to keep me from drowning, seeing as how you are literally standing on water. Why don't you get the boat to come over here and then I can hold on to that. I know that boat is made to float, unlike us." But Peter trusted in the power of Jesus. He didn't trust in that power to work in his own life, not yet, but he knew without hesitation that Jesus could and would save him. He knew that Jesus could reach down and pull him out of the water, even though that made no earthly sense. His faith was small, but it was enough to trust in his Saviour.

Most days, that kind of trust is all I can muster. I hope and yearn for the other kind, the fuller kind. But on days where that trust is a faint glimmer, I hope I trust enough to simply take the hand of Jesus when he offers to help me. Most days, I am okay with having the trust of a drowning man.

Grace and Glory

For Jehovah God is a sun and a shield:

Jehovah will give grace and glory;

No good thing will he withhold from them that walk uprightly.

Psalm 84:11

Psalm 84:11 is one of the most beautiful, majestic Psalms. Here we find these two words together, in juxtaposition that brings hope, blessing and encouragement to followers of Jesus. The Lord will give grace and glory. The context of this most precious Psalm is one of a pilgrim longing for God's house and being on a journey where he is unable to be there. But he finds God's strength sufficient for his pilgrimage (verses 5-7) and so he journeys on toward Jerusalem. The climactic part, verses 10-12, is his testimony that he would rather spend one day in God's courts than thousands elsewhere. Verse 11 is powerful: the LORD God is a sun and shield, and grants "favor and honor," a more modern way to render "grace and glory." Thus we see that there is an immediate application to the present, as he goes on to say "he does not withhold the good from those who live with integrity." (CSB)

Charles Spurgeon states:

Who else could give either grace or glory? But God is full of grace—His very name is Love—it is His Nature to freely dispense of His goodness to others. As it is according to the nature of the sun to shine, so it is according to the Nature of God to give good things to His creatures. In Him all fullness dwells—all grace and all glory are perpetually resident in Jehovah, the Infinite. What a mercy it is that we, poor empty sinners, have to do with a God of such fullness and of such goodness! If He were shorthanded with His love, what would become of us? If He had but little graciousness, if He

had but little glory, then we great sinners must certainly perish. But since the Lord is a bottomless well of love and a topless mountain of grace, we may come to Him, and come freely, without any fear that either His grace or His glory will ever suffer any diminution. Note again that the text says, "Jehovah will give grace and glory." Not only has He these wondrous blessings, but He has them that He may give them freely. If He were to keep them to Himself, He would be none the richer, and when He distributes them, He is none the poorer! The Lord does not sell grace or glory, He does not put them up to auction to those who can give something in return for them. God is a great Giver and a great Forgiver. He gives grace and glory without money, without price and without any merit in the receiver. The Lord gives—there is nothing freer than a gift and there can be nothing freer than that greatest of all the gifts of God, eternal life! That expression, "eternal life," sums up these two things—grace and glory. "The Lord will give grace and glory." It is His glory to give His grace and because of His graciousness, He gives glory! [1. Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit #2502]

Yet, "grace and glory," surely suggest our future blessing in eternity as well. "'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home" (John Newton). I thought of some songs that feature the phrase "grace and glory," some of which emphasize the here and now, while others the "sweet by and by."

"Where He Leads Me I Will Follow" – a song of commitment and trust, where the lines of the verses are repeated as "I can hear my Savior calling," "He'll go with me through the garden," "He'll go with me through the judgment," and finally "He will give me grace and glory." The refrain says "Where He leads me I will follow (three times)...He'll go with me, with me, all the way." From His initial call to the grace and glory that await, no doubt a reference to Heaven, He will truly go with me all the way. [2. Where He Leads Me: Ernest W. Blandy,

1890]

A group called "Poet Voices" sang a song about a decade or so ago called "Grace and Glory." Again, borrowing from those beautiful words it states "His love is full of grace and glory that is why I sing."

Unmerited favor of the Savior falling from His holiness
It is never ending grace extending from His righteousness
To the undeserving, God is serving bountiful supply
His great love's abounding and surrounding us from sky to sky.[3. Phil Cross, Bridge Building Music, BMI, Chris White Music, BMI]

Christian songwriter, poet, and comedian Aaron Wilburn wrote a song some years ago in which "grace and glory," while not the theme or title, still figures prominently in the message. Recently performed by a number of singing groups, it was a favorite of Aaron's mother: "That Sounds Like Home to Me," a song about Heaven, in which the refrain thrills the believer's heart by affirming "the hills will echo with the story as we sing of His grace and glory. Wow! To think that one day we'll extol His grace and glory throughout the ages.[4. C.A. Wilburn and Edwin Crook, Werner Chappel Music, Inc.]

Finally, there comes to my mind a song I heard only a couple of months ago by a trio I enjoy a great deal. Songwriter Sue C. Smith and collaborators beautiful lyrics, and Karen Peck's country soprano delivers yet another song of hope "On the Banks of the Promised Land." My soul is set to soar when I hear the refrain "Hallelujah, what a morning, when I reach for that nail-scarred hand, and I'm led by His grace and His glory, on the banks of the Promised Land." [5. Sue C. Smith, David Moffit, Jason Dyba]

My conclusions: The Psalm would indicate that grace and glory are for both now and for the future. It's grace that saves us now, that guides and guards us in this life, that leads us on

this earthly pilgrimage, but it is also grace that leads us home, to again quote John Newton.

To glory – what does that mean? The goal, the end of God's grace working in us is to transport us to glory, as some of the songs I've quoted suggest. But we might also say that the grace at work in us brings glory to Him who is worthy of it all – grace to glory. And most definitely grace accomplishes glory – His glory and our enjoyment of it and rapture in it – here on earth temporarily and imperfectly, and permanently and perfectly in Heaven.

These past days have been bittersweet. Services at church have been good, and it is thrilling to see our Hispanic group there, growing in the Lord, and becoming more involved. However, news came of the passing of two friends, both named Tim. Tim Hayes was from Illinois, very active in his church, in missions, and with the Master's Men Disaster Relief Team. I have known him since college days. A massive heart attack. Then, Tim Coats, formerly a Home Missionary in South Dakota, and in recent years a bivocational pastor there in Rapid City. He and Kathy were summer missionaries with us in 1982 in Panama when our kids were very small. Faithful men, good friends. They have now gone from grace to glory, praise the Lord.