

Faith Resurrected:

A Devotional Companion to *The Insanity of God*

*by Nik Ripken
and Barry Stricker*

© 2016 Nik Ripken & Barry Stricker

*“For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways,”
declares the Lord.
Isaiah 55:8*

*“My purpose will stand,
and I will do all that I please.”
Isaiah 46:10b*

Introduction

Before *The Insanity of God* was published in 2013, there was significant debate about the book's proposed title. Most of the people involved in that debate argued that using the word "insanity" would cause people to distance themselves from the book. They made the point that the title itself might prove to be a handicap. And that opinion very nearly carried the day. As difficult as it is to gain a hearing, it seemed that the controversial title might make broad reception of the book unlikely. And sure enough, when the book was published, some booksellers were hesitant even to display the book in public. Sometimes it was kept behind the counter; at other times, it was available only by special order.

While the debate about the title was raging, a passionate minority (including Nik Ripken himself) stood resolute. These few hearty souls fought for the title that was eventually chosen: *The Insanity of God*. Without a shred of disrespect or irreverence, the minority view claimed that God's ways are so unusual that, by normal human standards, they should be considered outside of the boundaries of what we would typically call "sane."

Indeed, God himself has told us the very same thing in his word. He is forever reminding us that he is different – and that his ways are different. And not merely different, but scandalous, shocking, disturbing . . . holy.

So in *The Insanity of God* we were reintroduced to this unusual God who accomplishes his work in such unusual ways. This God allows his beloved children to suffer. He uses persecution for his purposes. He sometimes leaves his children in prison – and often for a long time. He does not always provide immediate rescue; sometimes he does not provide rescue at all. He loves relentlessly – even when he is rejected. And it seems that he will never give up. This God even enters into the suffering himself.

His ways are clearly unusual – we might even call them insane.

In *The Insanity of God*, we were *reintroduced* to this God. It was not a new introduction, because most of us have already met him. We have read his story in Scripture. We have encountered his strange ways in history. And if the truth is to be told, we have known him and we have walked with him and we have loved him. It was not an introduction, but a *reintroduction*.

One of the great themes of *The Insanity of God* reminds us that the God that we read about in the Bible is still at work today – and that he is still doing the very things that he has always done. Behind every story in *The Insanity of God* is a biblical foundation. As we breathlessly encountered the stories of Dmitri and Stoyan and Pastor Chang (and

many others), we instinctively whispered the same words: “I have heard that story somewhere before! I have encountered that same God elsewhere! He has done these very things at other times!” And if we are fortunate and blessed, we recognize that we have met this same God both in Scripture and in our own lives.

This same God who has been at work from the beginning . . . is at work today, here, now. And he is doing the same things he has always done. *The Insanity of God* bears witness to that great truth.

The book that you hold in your hands is a devotional companion to *The Insanity of God*. If the goal of *The Insanity of God* was to motivate us to cross the ocean or to cross the street to share Jesus with our world, this new book is intended to help us love God deeply enough to do exactly that.

This book will follow *The Insanity of God* chapter by chapter. For each chapter there will be a devotional entry (or two) that relates to themes that surface in that particular chapter. Each devotional entry will include a Scripture passage, words of reflection, a prayer, and several follow-up questions. The book that you now hold in your hands is intended to be read slowly, prayerfully, reflectively. Take time to read and study the Scripture passages. Take time to write down your thoughts. Take time to think carefully about the questions. Most of all, take time to pray. Invite God to speak as you spend time with him and his word.

If you have already read *The Insanity of God*, we suggest that you find your copy and reread it as you work through this devotional guide. And if you have not yet read *The Insanity of God*, we encourage you to secure a copy and read it along with this new book. Of course, you are also welcome to read this book independently – though it is specifically written as a resource for *The Insanity of God*.

It is a wonder that God is at work in this world. It is perhaps an even greater wonder that he would invite us to join him as he works. This book is intended to draw us close to this God – so that it will be only natural that we take the next step and join him in his work.

How to Use This Resource in a Small Group Setting

Faith Resurrected: A Devotional Companion to The Insanity of God is ideally suited to be used by individuals, but it can also be easily adapted for the use of small groups.

If you are working with a small group, first make certain that all of your group members have access to both *The Insanity of God* and *Faith Resurrected*. As a group, decide on a schedule and on the number of times that you will meet. Ideally, you will want to read specific chapters in *The Insanity of God* along with the corresponding sections of *Faith Resurrected*. During the week, participants will do that kind of study on their own. Then the group will gather once a week to reflect, share, and pray together.

You may choose to read the books more slowly (increasing the number of group meetings) or you may choose to read the books more quickly (reducing the number of group meetings). To assist you in developing a plan, here is a suggested approach:

Initial group meeting: use this gathering to enlist participants, to distribute or secure copies of the books, to set a schedule for both individual study and group meetings, and to pray that God will use this shared experience for his purposes.

During the following week, participants will be asked to read a portion of *The Insanity of God* and work through the corresponding devotional entries in *Faith Resurrected*.

The same pattern will be followed each week. The chapter numbers and titles are identical in both books. After each week of individual study, there will be a small group meeting.

Week One: study the Prologue and Chapters One through Four of *The Insanity of God* and the corresponding chapters of *Faith Resurrected*.

Week Two: study Chapters Five through Nine of *The Insanity of God* and the corresponding chapters of *Faith Resurrected*.

Week Three: study Chapters Ten through Fourteen of *The Insanity of God* and the corresponding chapters of *Faith Resurrected*.

Week Four: study Chapters Fifteen through Nineteen of *The Insanity of God* and the corresponding chapters of *Faith Resurrected*.

Week Five: study Chapters Twenty through Twenty-Four of *The Insanity of God* and the corresponding chapters of *Faith Resurrected*.

Week Six: study Chapters Twenty-Five through Twenty-Nine of *The Insanity of God* and the corresponding chapters of *Faith Resurrected*.

Week Seven: study Chapters Thirty through Thirty-Four of *The Insanity of God* and the corresponding chapters of *Faith Resurrected*.

During your small group sessions, take time to reflect on the readings and the Bible studies. Devote special attention to the questions for reflection that are found at the end of each section of *Faith Resurrected*. And allow extended time for prayer together as a group.

You will also want to be aware that a follow-up book to *The Insanity of God* was published in 2014. That book is entitled *The Insanity of Obedience*, and it gathers together some of the significant lessons and themes that grew out of Nik Ripken's interviews with persecuted believers all around the world. It may be that your group will want to study *The Insanity of Obedience* after completing a study of *The Insanity of God* and *Faith Resurrected*.

The schedule suggested here will require eight group meetings (including the initial organizational gathering). Again, feel free to adapt these suggestions and to develop your own plan of study that will meet the specific needs of your small group. You might want to cover less material each week (and increase the number of group meetings). Or you might want to cover more material each week (and decrease the number of group meetings). In any case, make sure that you provide adequate time for reflection, absorption, conversation, and prayer.

As you study, keep these questions at the forefront: *How will I respond to what I am encountering in these books? What would God have me do in light of what I am reading? How will my life be different because of this study?*

Prologue

The High Cost of Obedience

Matthew 16:13-26

Many of us have a personal theology . . . that has very little to do with what God teaches us in his word.

In all likelihood, part of that personal theology suggests that things work out for those who obey, that blessings come to those who follow God's call, and that the result of discipleship is health and wholeness and happiness. And we are inclined to believe that – even when it is directly contradicted by God's word.

In today's passage, Jesus talks to his followers about his own obedience, and about theirs. In both cases, Jesus points to the high cost that will follow obedience. For his part, he explains that he will suffer many things and that he will be killed. With those painful words echoing in the air, Jesus then talks about the suffering that will come to those who follow him.

We tend to embrace stories with happy endings, but this story told by Jesus has no happy ending at all, at least not in the short term. He tells his dear friends plainly that following him will mean denying themselves and taking up the cross.

The context for these hard words is startling. In response to Jesus' question about his identity, Peter has answered correctly. With God-given insight, Peter has passed the test: "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God" (16:16). Then Jesus proceeds to explain exactly what it means for him to be the Christ, the Son of the Living God. He speaks of suffering. He speaks of persecution. He speaks of death. Clearly, Jesus intends to be radically obedient to his Father; he will not be dissuaded by the expectations of others (even Peter). This kind of obedience will cost him everything.

Frankly, it is one thing to hear Jesus talking about his own cross. It is another thing altogether to hear him talking about my cross and yours. It is one thing to hear Jesus talking about losing his own life; it is another thing altogether to hear what he says about your life and mine.

But he cannot be any clearer. Jesus will obey his Father – and he fully expects his followers to do the same.

For Jesus, this obedience is no mere obligation. It is a joyous response to his Father, growing out of deep and abiding trust. Quite simply, Jesus obeys *because he wants to*. As costly as obedience will be for Jesus, it is not a duty, not a begrudging resignation – it is, rather, a joyous opportunity to respond to his Father’s love.

And we are invited to approach obedience the same way – to obey our Lord simply because we want to, to live a life beyond the rules and requirements, to obey as a direct outcome of a joyous, life-giving relationship with this God who loves us so. Yes, obedience will carry a high cost; Jesus has made that clear. Still, we joyfully obey – and we find our lives by losing them. We submit our dreams to the One who made us – and we discover that for which we were created.

To be sure, obedience will always be costly. We cannot be surprised that Jesus tells us the truth. But that high cost need not be a begrudging debt. Even the cost of obedience can be a joyous offering of praise – something that is difficult *and* wonderful at the same time.

God wants our obedience. Even more, he wants our hearts. He wants for us to *want* to obey. And he himself will provide all that we need for that to happen.

Jesus obeyed his Father. And those who follow Jesus will do the same. Not simply because that kind of obedience is required – but because those who follow Jesus are becoming the kind of people who want to obey.

*Lord God,
change me.
Change my heart.
Give me the courage to love you deeply.
Give me the strength to obey you fully.
Help me to trust you enough to walk with you . . .
with confidence and hope and joy.
Teach me that the high cost of obedience
can be an offering of praise.
Help me not to seek another way, an easier way –
but to embrace this way that you have set before me,
costly though it may be.
Help me to find my life by giving it away.
Help me to find freedom in service to others.
Help me find great joy in deep surrender.
I desire to live a life of joyful obedience before you.
Amen*

Questions for reflection:

1. What Jesus says about costly obedience is so contrary to what our world says. (Sadly, it is often contrary even to what the church says!) How might you absorb and embrace this truth that is so clearly out of step with the other messages that compete for your heart and mind?
2. What will a life of radical obedience look like for you – right now? What will it mean for you to deny yourself? What will it look like for you to take up your cross?
3. Is your obedience normally a begrudging obligation – or is it a joyful response to God? What is the difference between an obligation and a joyful response?

Not Safe, But Completely Secure

Psalm 125

It is rather silly to suggest that we not care about safety. Safety, in fact, is one of the core values of our world.

But safety is not one of God's core values. And safety is not a core value for the people of God.

In fact, if safety were our main consideration, then safety would define what we would do and what we would not do for the sake of the gospel. Our primary question would be, "Is it safe?" We would find ourselves sharing our faith *as long as it is safe*. We would consider sending out mission teams *as long as it is safe*. We would be willing to share a verbal witness with a neighbor *as long as it is safe*. We would make financial decisions (as individuals and as churches) based on how *safe* those decisions are. We would find ourselves asking the same question over and over again: "Is this safe?"

Much to our surprise, though, faithfulness to God's call trumps safety every time! Safety is never the ultimate goal for the people of God. We are called to faithful response *regardless of how safe it is*. So if we are faithful, we will go and we will send and we will speak and we will serve and we will give and we will share and we will pray . . . even when it is not safe.

God has not promised that his people will be safe. He *does* promise us something – but it is not safety. What God promises is ultimate security – the certainty that he will one day have his way. But in the meantime, there is danger and risk and almost certain loss. In the meantime, there is sacrifice and suffering and great cost.

And *in the meantime* is exactly where we live.

Psalm 125 celebrates the ultimate security that can be found in God. But Psalm 125 is also painfully honest about the very real danger of living in this kind of world. There are great affirmations in this psalm about the strength and power and victory of God. But there are no easy promises about safety here and now. This psalm assures us, in fact, that evil is real and rampant. Psalm 125 helps us understand the staggering difference between safety and security – and this psalm helps us understand what exactly God has promised to his people.

Verses 1 and 2 of Psalm 125 remind us that those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, the Mountain of God. The Mountain of God cannot be moved. It cannot be shaken. It abides forever. The same can be said for God's people. Those who trust in God cannot be moved. They cannot be shaken. And they, too, will abide forever. Just as Jerusalem is surrounded by mighty mountains, God's people are surrounded by him. The kind of security described here is something that is . . . forever! The Mountain of God abides *forever*! Those who trust in God abide *forever*! These two verses highlight the lasting and eternal security of God.

Verse 3, however, moves into a different realm. Verse 3 draws us into the temporal, the here and now, the time between today and eternity. The current moment is bleak – a time when evil apparently has the upper hand. Notice the reference to “the scepter of the wicked” in verse 3. Even worse, according to the last part of verse 3, the situation is so troubling that even the righteous are wavering; even the faithful are feeling tempted to stretch our *their* hands to do wrong!

Still, the timing reflected in verse 3 is significant. We are told that the scepter of the wicked will not *remain* over the land allotted to the righteous. In other words, this moment when evil appears to have the upper hand will not last – not because evil is not strong, but because it is God who shortens and limits evil's reign. What we learn here is that evil is temporary. Nothing that stands against God's justice has permanence. And we cling to that truth especially during this meantime when things seem so bleak. Evil is temporary . . . but it is quite real.

In verses 4 and 5, the psalmist moves into prayer. The psalmist prays specifically that God would “do good to those who are good.” The “good” here are those who persevere, those who remain true to the Lord despite the current circumstances. Then finally, the psalmist prays that God will do what needs to be done with the evildoers and with those who turn to crooked ways.

And then one final word: *peace*. Something that is possible only if the Lord should grant it – and something that is possible only if his people remain steadfast.

This is a fascinating psalm. And the psalm includes the honest admission that, even though God's security is certain, things do not feel all that safe in the meantime. Yes, one day there will be peace! Yes, one day those who stand against God will be defeated. But in the meantime . . . what a struggle! What pain! What cost! What danger!

We live in the meantime. We live in a time when faithfully walking with God will likely *increase our suffering*! We live in a time when walking faithfully with God will likely *decrease our safety*!

And in this difficult meantime, we find an anchor in the words of the apostle Paul in Romans 8:35-39. Will anything come between Christ and us? No, of course not! A

thousand times – NO! But notice this: the reason these troubles will not separate us from Christ is not because these troubles do not come to followers of Jesus. In fact, these troubles *do* come our way. We are like sheep to be slaughtered, Paul explains. No, the reason these troubles do not separate us from Christ is because Christ holds us secure. Christ holds us secure whatever might be happening in the meantime.

As much as we might love safety, safety is not our aim.

It would probably have been safer for the children of Israel simply to remain in Egypt. It would have been safer for Moses to remain a shepherd. It would have been safer for Esther to mind her own business. It would have been safer for Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to bow down to the idol. It would have been safer for Paul to avoid going to Jerusalem.

And it will likely be safer for you not to share your faith with your neighbor. It will be safer for your church not to send out mission teams. It will be safer for you not to get on the plane. It will be safer not to let the world get under our skin. It will be safer to gather for worship each week and simply go through the motions. It will be safer for us to keep our resources close to home.

That will all be safer. But it will not be faithful.

Much to our surprise, safety is not one of God's core values. And it is not a core value for God's people either. Mirroring the character of God, God's people value faithfulness, obedience, and trust. And we consider it a holy privilege to do exactly what God has called us to do . . . whether it is safe or not.

*Almighty God,
I am afraid.
I live in a frightening time.
I am afraid of things that might do me harm.
I am sometimes even afraid of trusting you.
And my prayer today
is that you would give me courage to walk with you . . .
even when I am afraid.
Remind me that nothing can separate me from your love.
Remind me that you are able.
Remind me that you hold me close
even in this dangerous meantime.
Help me not to make an idol of safety.
Do through me what I cannot do
in my own power.
Almighty God, be my strength.
Amen*

Questions for reflection:

1. In the Foreword of *The Insanity of God*, David Platt makes this startling statement: “Clearly, there is a sense in which the danger of our lives increases in proportion to the depth of our relationship with Christ.” Danger is not something we normally embrace. What is your reaction to David Platt’s claim? Is he right? Is a deeper relationship with Christ something that you are willing to pursue – if, in fact, that will increase danger in your life?
2. What kind of danger might come to you – or to your church – if you choose to go deeper in your walk? What might it cost you and what might it cost others for you to have a deeper relationship with Jesus? On the other hand, what might it cost you and what might it cost others for you to step away from that deeper relationship with Jesus?
3. How do you choose between your own safety and the need of others to hear about Jesus? Does Jesus actually send his followers into unsafe places simply because the need of others to know him is greater than our need for safety?
4. What are you willing to sacrifice for the sake of obedience to Jesus?

One: Descent into Hell

Called Close to Be Sent Out

Mark 3:13-19

From a larger gathering of followers, Jesus selected a group of twelve. Sometimes we call this inner circle “disciples,” a word that simply means follower or learner. Sometimes these twelve are called “apostles,” a word that designates someone who is sent out on behalf of another. Even though those two words have a specific historical meaning, both words can describe those who follow Jesus today. Those of us who follow Jesus today desire to learn from him and we have also heard clearly his call to go out on his behalf. In that broad sense, we are disciples and we are apostles.

Mark 3:14 highlights the dual purpose that Jesus has in mind.

In appointing these twelve, Jesus intends, first, that they might be with him. In calling us to himself, Jesus draws us close. The picture here speaks of intimate relationship, close communion, time together. Jesus desires that we “be with him.” In his presence – with him – we are changed. As we read the gospel accounts, we find the disciples walking with Jesus, sharing meals with Jesus, and learning from Jesus; in a word, these disciples have been invited to be with him. And they find great joy being in his presence.

As wonderful as that intimate time together is, though, it is only part of Jesus’ purpose. Jesus also intends to send his followers out. First, they are sent out to preach (highlighting the crucial role of proclamation in the work of mission). Second, they are sent out to have authority to drive out demons (highlighting the intense spiritual nature of the struggle). Whatever the specific task, Jesus’ followers are clearly sent out.

Significantly, both drawing close to Jesus and being sent out from Jesus are essential to his call and essential to his intention for those who follow him.

This is painfully obvious, but we cannot choose one or the other. To draw near to Jesus – and to avoid his call to go – invalidates the work that he desires to do in us and through us. To go – without first drawing near to Jesus – makes our effort meaningless and

ineffectual. An intimate walk with Jesus leads *inevitably* to a passion for mission. And it is that same intimate walk that empowers the work that we are expected to embrace.

Jesus himself made clear the purpose for his own coming: “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost” (Luke 19:10). And that same purpose defines his expectation for those who follow him: “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you” (John 20:21).

Quite simply, we have been invited to be with Jesus . . . so that we might be sent out from Jesus. That dual purpose guides all that we are and all that we do.

*Lord Jesus,
thank you for calling me close.
Thank you for making it possible for me to know you.
I take delight in walking with you,
in knowing you,
in loving you.
In relationship with you,
I am changed.
Thank you for calling me close . . .
so that you might send me out.
Help me to understand that being with you
and going out from you
are both essential purposes in your call.
May my walk with you empower my witness.
And may my witness reveal the fact
that I have been with you.
Amen*

Questions for reflection:

1. Chapter One of *The Insanity of God* describes a scene that is barely comprehensible. At the end of his first day in Somalia, Nik prays: “Please, Jesus, get me out of here!” How do you feel about possibly being sent by Jesus into a place that is uncomfortable, strange, even dangerous? Do you ever want to put conditions on your willingness to be obedient to Jesus’ call? How would Jesus respond to your desire to place conditions on his call?
2. Are you ever tempted to shortchange your ongoing devotional practices because of your involvement in ministry or missions? In other words, do you ever feel that “drawing close to Jesus” is not always essential or necessary? Do you ever wonder if that time with Jesus might get in the way of the “important” work that

you are doing? How do you overcome those feelings? How are you able to keep your walk with Jesus intimate and real day by day?

Overcoming Our Resistance

Jeremiah 1:4-8

Jeremiah's word, in response to God's clear call, is a word of resistance. That happens to be a common response to God's call – both in Bible times and today. Moses and Gideon and Jeremiah are prime examples, but many other names could be added to the list . . . the list of those who hear God's call and try to explain why God is surely mistaken. My name would likely be on that list. And your name would probably be there too. We seem to be gifted at explaining why we cannot possibly do what God is asking.

Our responses to God are generally quite sincere.

“What am I doing here?”

“How exactly did this happen?”

“Is God really behind this – and if he is, does he really know what he is doing?”

“How could God possibly intend to use someone like me?”

In Jeremiah's case, he is not simply being modest. When he points out that he is merely a child, he is telling the truth. Jeremiah is fully convinced that he is too young and too inexperienced to be used by God. Even so, God will make it clear that Jeremiah's response – as true as it might be – is completely beside the point. If Scripture tells us anything, it tells us that God tends to call people who are too young, too timid, too old, too inexperienced, or too immoral. God seems to take delight in calling people who are inadequate for the task and almost certain to fail. So the story is never about the qualifications of the one being called. Rather, the story is about this risk-taking, bold sort of God who finds the people he wants and, then, gives them what they need – so that they might complete the task that he assigns.

God, in effect, says, “I am going to do something here – and I have chosen you to be a part of it!”

So we start with that . . . with the certainty that God is at work, that he is clear in his purpose, and that he is firmly committed to its fulfillment.

Then we add to that his call – his call of us – his call of those who are too old, too busy, too under-qualified, too inexperienced, too sinful.

Surely, we think, someone else should be doing this task.

But God says, “I am going to do something here – and I want you to help me.”

*Bold, risk-taking God,
I am inadequate for the task.
My excuses sound perfectly reasonable to me.
I cannot imagine why you would desire to use me.
I am not qualified.
Yet your call is unmistakable.
I hesitate even to speak the words,
but I know that you can do
more than I can ask
and more than I can imagine.
So I know this well:
if you call me, you will equip me.
Through your power,
you can make me adequate for the task.
Though my willingness is halting,
I say Yes.
Use me.
Despite my weakness,
use me.
Amen*

Questions for reflection:

1. What are your typical responses to God’s call? What reasons do you offer to God to explain why his call of you is a mistake?
2. In Chapter One of *The Insanity of God*, Nik feels utterly inadequate. What is your normal course of action when you feel inadequate?
3. Reflect on a time in your life when God allowed you and empowered you to do something that was far beyond your ability.

Two: Growing Up Country

Small Beginnings

2 Timothy 1:3-7

Even as we think about God's call to go, we would be wise to revisit the very beginnings of our relationship with Jesus. There are as many different testimonies as there are followers of Jesus. The common strain in each story is that *somehow* God found a way to reach us. Beyond that, though, our individual stories are diverse and staggeringly different.

For some of us, our conversion seemed as simple as taking the next step. Embracing Jesus as Lord and Savior happened naturally and without much drama. For others of us, we came into the kingdom kicking and screaming. For some of us, our beginning steps were marked by fits and starts. In Nik's case, there was the powerful encounter with the resurrection of Jesus in a worship service. But if we read his story carefully, there was also only partial understanding and, sadly, a long season of disinterest after an initial burst of excitement.

Where precisely salvation "happens" is not always easy to determine. But somehow God has a way of reaching us – and he is very patient as he works to bring us close.

Writing to young Timothy, Paul encourages a season of remembrance. Paul specifically mentions Lois and Eunice, Timothy's grandmother and mother. Paul calls to mind the faith that first lived in them, and he says clearly that the same faith now lives in Timothy. The faith has been passed down, and Timothy is the recipient of a precious heritage.

Timothy did not come to the faith on his own; God used other people to help it happen. Just like Timothy, we are wise to remember our spiritual beginnings. We are wise to name the names of those who helped us meet Jesus. We are wise to recall holy times and holy places. Even if our spiritual beginning was not smooth or easy – and even if our spiritual beginning was marked by fits and starts – we are wise to thank God for his settled intention to bring us close.

And as we celebrate the gift of his grace, we also grapple with that great responsibility that is ours because of his grace. We have been blessed to be a blessing. We have been

brought into the family of faith for a purpose. We have been called out and we have been given a calling. We have heard the story so that we might tell it to others.

Perhaps the names are different in your story, but think today about your “Eunice” and your “Lois.” Who first told you the stories of Jesus? Who helped you understand God’s heart for the world? Who encouraged you to grow? Who loved you into the kingdom? Who passed on the faith to you?

We have been entrusted with a precious gift. And now it is our responsibility – it is our privilege – to “fan into flame the gift of God” (2 Timothy 1:6).

*Gracious God,
I thank you for finding me,
reaching me,
saving me.
And I thank you for the people in my life
who helped that happen.
I think today of the people who were
my Eunice and my Lois.
Thank you for the faith that first lived in them –
and thank you for the faith that,
because of them,
now lives in me.
Help me to honor that precious legacy
by fanning into flame
the gift that I have been given.
Today, I remember
with profound gratitude and thanksgiving.
Amen.*

Questions for reflection:

1. As you think about your own relationship with Jesus, what memories do you have of the beginning steps in that process? Who helped you take those steps? Are there specific places or events that stand out in your mind? How often do you pause to thank God for the circumstances that helped you begin your life with Jesus?
2. At the end of Chapter Two, Nik makes a painful observation. He says, “For the next seven years of my life, I found little about the Bible, church, or the Christian faith that excited my spirit again.” Have you ever experienced that kind of season? How might you avoid that kind of dryness in your spiritual life now?

3. Are you willing to acknowledge that your enthusiasm for Jesus – or your lack of enthusiasm for Jesus – profoundly affects other people . . . both those who already follow Jesus and those who do not follow him yet? How should that awareness affect the way that you live?

Three: The Face of Evil

Imperfect Conditions

Matthew 14:1-21

Typically, many of us read the gospels as a series of disjointed, unrelated stories. When we read that way, however, we fail to see how the events of Jesus' ministry are related and closely tied together. The first few sections of Matthew 14, for example, lend themselves to this kind of disjointed reading. The first twelve verses of that chapter describe the death of John the Baptist. Then verse thirteen begins a completely different story that we normally call "The Feeding of the Five Thousand." (Often the headings in our modern translations of Scripture make it difficult to draw connections between the stories.) If we read Matthew 14 carefully, however, we see how closely related the various stories are.

Matthew 14 begins with a terrible episode – the story of King Herod taking the life of John the Baptist. It is a gruesome story. Herod, we are told, already desires to take John's life. He has not been able to do that, though, because he is afraid of the reaction of the people. But on Herod's birthday, he makes a boast. Deeply pleased with the dancing of the daughter of Herodias, Herod promises to give her anything she asks. Prompted by her mother, the daughter requests the head of John the Baptist on a platter. Scripture tells us that "because of his oaths and his dinner guests," Herod honors her request.

After the evil deed is done, John's disciples go to Jesus and they tell him what has happened. As we often read Matthew 14, that seems to be "the end of the story." There appears to be a break in the story – and that break is confirmed by the new heading in our text that introduces a new episode.

But notice the connection in verse thirteen.

In response to what has just happened to John, Jesus withdraws (by boat) to a solitary place. Clearly, Jesus is grieving and he is deeply sad for John, his relative and dear friend. Jesus surely deserves some time alone. But the people get wind of his location – and they track him down. In fact, the people are already there when Jesus' boat reaches land.

And here is *what we might expect to read next*: “And Jesus, when he saw the crowd, said to them, ‘Leave me alone. Can’t you see that I am grieving? A terrible thing has just happened. No miracles today. Not today.’” That is *what we might expect to read next*.

Instead, amazingly, we read this: “When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick” (verse 14).

What we see in Matthew 14 (among other things) is that there are no perfect conditions for ministry. Often, we feel good about ministry when it is on our terms, when things seem to be going well, when people are responding the way we want them to – in a word, when the conditions are right. But what we see here in Jesus is compassion, ministry, care, help – in a moment that is not perfect at all. What we see is ministry growing out of a time of great grief and suffering and loss. This terrible thing has just happened – and Jesus *does* attempt to get away – but *when he sees the people*, there is no irritation, no frustration, no anger, no selfishness, no isolation. There is only compassion and healing and feeding and teaching.

Most of us are quite familiar with the story of “The Feeding of the Five Thousand,” but rarely do we see that story within a setting of Jesus’ personal grief and heartache. And maybe that does not change the story all that much.

On the other hand, maybe it does . . .

It is possible for us to wake up some days, jump out of bed, and declare with a smile, “Hey, this is a great day for ministry!” That *is* possible. And it might even happen from time to time. But most days are quite different. Most days are not great days for ministry. Hard things have happened. There have been disappointments. Sometimes there is grief and heartache. Life is sometimes such a mess that we do not even know where to begin. Yet those days that are not exactly “right” for ministry – those days of imperfect conditions – often turn out to be days especially designed for ministry.

We do not get to minister only on days when everything feels right. Just like Jesus, we minister when the losses come, when there is personal pain, when we ourselves are struggling with disappointment, and even when nothing significant seems to be happening. In other words, we minister all the time. The only two requirements are human need and deep compassion. Together, human need and deep compassion provide the perfect conditions for ministry.

Jesus tries to get away to a solitary place. But he is quickly and magnetically drawn back to the needs of broken people. Almost immediately, he is back at work.

We are not Jesus, of course. But it is likely that he would have us minister in that same way.

*Compassionate God,
break my heart
with the needs of this broken world.
Teach me that every moment
is the right moment
for grace and compassion and kindness.
Remove my unrealistic desire
for perfect conditions.
Teach me that need and compassion
are the only necessities for ministry.
Show me the deep need of the world.
Create in me a heart of compassion.
Then, bring together
that need and that compassion.
Help me to reflect the heart of Jesus
as I walk through this broken world.
Amen*

Questions for reflection:

1. The scene described in Chapter Three of *The Insanity of God* is anything but perfect. Nik finds himself staring into the face of evil and he cries out to Jesus, "If I ever get out of this place, I am never coming back." Have you ever been in the presence of such profound need that you had no hope? In that moment, what did you pray? In that moment, what did God say to you?
2. Characters like King Herod bring such pain to our world. Nik describes a situation where people are selling and buying an addictive drug in the presence of severe hunger and starvation. Hearing a story like that, are you inclined to feel deep discouragement? Does the story make you angry? If so, what do you do with that discouragement and that anger? How do you pray in response to a story like that?
3. Nik reports that when he returned to his family in Kenya after his initial visit to Somalia, he felt guilty. What would God have us do with appropriate and sincere guilt when we are broken by the needs of our world?

Our Eyes Are on You

2 Chronicles 20:1-30

Standing at a point of decision, we often suggest our best idea – and then we ask God to bless what we are about to do.

King Jehoshaphat, in 1 Chronicles 20, models a very different approach. Facing impossible odds and approaching armies, King Jehoshaphat pleads with God for direction. The heart of his prayer is both simple and dramatic. To the Lord, Jehoshaphat says, “We do not know what to do, but our eyes are upon you” (20:12).

Often, we are uncomfortable not knowing what to do, but the king’s prayer reminds us of a great truth: normally we simply do not know what to do, and we are completely dependent on God to show us the way.

Even beyond the humble wisdom of verse 12, we find in 2 Chronicles 20 a model for seeking God’s guidance:

The king and the people face an overwhelming crisis (verse 1).

The king resolves to inquire of the Lord (verse 3).

The king leads the people to seek the Lord by declaring a fast (verse 3).

The people come together to seek the Lord (verse 4).

The king, in his prayer, acknowledges utter dependence on the Lord’s leadership (verse 12).

God speaks to his people (verse 14).

God assures the people of his wisdom and his power (verses 15-17).

The people of God continue to give themselves to God in worship (verses 18-19).

God acts on their behalf (verse 22).

God grants peace and rest to his people and causes other nations to see his power (verses 29-30).

What a wonderful model for seeking the heart of God!

As we struggle to discern direction, we would be wise to follow Jehoshaphat's example. Rather than asking God to bless the plans that we make, we are invited simply to ask God to show us the way to go.

And at the heart of that request is this simple word: "Lord, we do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you."

*God of Wisdom,
show me the way to go.
Guide my steps and shape my thoughts.
My best ideas are weak and small and often wrong.
In all sincerity,
I confess that I do not know what to do next.
But this I know:
my eyes are fixed on you.
As you lead, I will follow.
As you send, I will go.
As you instruct, I will obey.
Thank you for not expecting me to work out a plan.
Instead, I trust you to show me your way.
I hunger to hear from you.
I desire to respond to your guidance
with eager obedience.
Amen*

Questions for reflection:

1. Nik was well trained theologically and missiologically. He had extensive experience. Even so, in response to what he had seen in Somalia, he said this: "I still wasn't clear about what a relief organization could accomplish there. Or even where we might start." Have you ever found yourself in a situation like that? Not knowing what to do – or even where to start – what was your next step?
2. How do you personally experience God's guidance? How exactly do you discern what he is saying to you when you pray? Do you honestly believe that God leads his people – or do you simply offer him your best idea and hope that things work out?

3. How would the people in your life (or in your church) react to your admission that, like King Jehoshaphat, you do not know the way to go? Could that be seen as incompetence? Fear? Hesitance to lead? Ignorance? How is humble seeking after God perceived in your world?

Four: But I Wanted to Be a Veterinarian

Speak, Lord

1 Samuel 3:1-21

That God speaks is one of the great affirmations of our faith. Scripture is consistent in describing God's ability to communicate. Further, Scripture teaches us that we can understand what God says. That much is certain.

At the same time, we often struggle with what that means. Our questions are as troubling as they are sincere.

How exactly does God speak?

How can I hear his voice?

How will I know that it is God speaking?

I want to know what God wants for me – is it possible for me to know what that is?

Even though we are sure that God speaks, we sometimes struggle to make sense of this God who promises to communicate with us. After all, he does not speak all the time. And he does not normally speak with an audible voice. And, honestly, it is sometimes hard to distinguish his voice from all the other voices that we hear. Even more, we often have a hard time listening. And once we hear him, we do not always like what he says.

In theory, we know all about this God who speaks. In practice, though, things may not be quite so clear.

In Scripture, it *seems* so much clearer. In today's passage, God speaks to Samuel with an audible voice. Granted, it takes Samuel a while to figure out what is happening – and he can hear this word from God only with Eli's assistance – but Samuel *does* hear from God. Many other Bible characters seem to have similar encounters with God. The words of Isaiah 30:21 are just as matter of fact: we are told that our ears will hear a voice telling us the way to go. In Chapter Four of *The Insanity of God*, Nik has a rather direct and

dramatic encounter with God in the cheese factory. Aware of so many examples, though, many of us wonder why God does not always communicate with us quite so clearly – or, at the very least, why we cannot always hear his voice.

In 1 Samuel 3:1, we are told that the word of the Lord was rare in those days. Evidently, at least at that time, encountering this God who speaks was not a normal, ordinary occurrence. In verse 7, we are told that the young boy Samuel did not yet know the Lord and that the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. Because he worked in the holy shrine at Shiloh, we might assume that Samuel would have already been well acquainted with the Lord. But evidently, that was not the case. Samuel lived in the house of the Lord at Shiloh – but he did not yet know the Lord.

One night, though, there is a voice in the night. Samuel assumes that it is Eli. He goes immediately to Eli and he says, “Here I am, Eli. What do you need?”

Eli is befuddled. “I didn’t call you,” he says. “Go back to bed.”

This happens three times. After the third time, Eli finally understands what it must mean. Samuel is hearing a voice in the night – and the voice does not belong to Eli. Eli tells Samuel what to do: “The Lord is calling you, Samuel! Go back – and when you hear the voice again, say, ‘Speak, Lord. I am your servant and I am listening.’”

And that is exactly what Samuel does.

Though Samuel may not yet understand this, it takes great courage to hear what God has to say! In fact, it often might be easier to pretend that we cannot hear a thing. And we likely will not hear a thing – until we tell God that we are ready to hear and that we want to hear. In Samuel’s case, this word from God is a troubling, difficult, dangerous word. And with great difficulty, he will share the word with Eli the following morning (1 Samuel 3:15-18). What matters most, though, is that God has spoken. God has been clear. And Samuel has understood what God has said.

That same dynamic can happen to us. With great fanfare – or with no fanfare at all – God can speak. He can call us into relationship. He can give us instructions. He can tell us things to come. He can correct and discipline. He can assure us of his love. And he can do all of that in a way that is clear and unmistakable and impossible to ignore.

In that experience, Samuel’s story becomes our own.

We wake in the middle of the night. In that moment, we realize that God is waiting for us – waiting for us to declare our willingness to hear. Then we speak those fateful words: “Lord, speak to me. I am your servant. And I am ready to listen.” And sure enough, once our willingness is declared, he speaks. He speaks words that we are expecting – and he speaks words that we would not have expected in a million years. But they are his words – all of them. Words that call for action and response. Words that we dare not keep secret. Words that, in every case, will come to pass.

We cannot always be exactly sure *how* God speaks. But the story of Samuel tells us plainly that God *does* speak. The story of Samuel tells us that we can hear him if we choose to. The story of Samuel tells us that we are then compelled to act on what we have heard.

Our responsibility is to make certain that we never ignore that voice.

Psalm 95:7-8 is a simple call for God's people to listen to our speaking God: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts . . ." That same word is repeated several times in the New Testament book of Hebrews (3:15 and 4:7). It is a simple plea for us to listen.

God does speak. And we can hear him if we choose to. And once we hear him, we have decisions to make.

*Speak to me, O God.
I long to hear your voice.
Even before I know exactly what you will say,
my answer is "Yes!"
Teach me to be still enough to listen,
quiet enough to hear.
Give me sensitive ears
and an open heart.
I am your servant.
I wait for a word from you.
Your word will guide my life
and shape my living.
Amen*

Questions for reflection:

1. God can speak in so many different ways. How does God most often speak to you? Which stories from the Bible echo your experience of hearing God?
2. Is it more difficult to hear a word from God – or to act on the word that you have heard? Why is it generally more acceptable to admit that we struggle with hearing God – but not that we struggle with obedience?
3. What do you make of Nik's experience late at night in the cheese factory? Have you ever had an experience like that? Why does God so rarely speak to us in such a dramatic way? On the other hand, why would he ever speak to us that way?

An Undivided Heart

Ezekiel 11:16-21

In the eleventh chapter of Ezekiel, we encounter a stern judgment against the leaders of Israel. Leaders, according to God, have a special responsibility – and here the leaders are called to account for their unfaithfulness. As severe as this word of judgment is, though, later in the chapter we come upon a tender word of hope and restoration. Through the prophet, God says: “I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh” (11:19).

It is God’s desire that his people have an undivided heart, a heart utterly committed to him. In Jeremiah 24:7, God echoes that same theme: “I will give them a heart to know me, that I am the Lord. They will be my people, and I will be their God, for they will return to me with all their heart.” Responding to God’s desire for his people, we often find God’s people wanting the same thing that God wants. As the psalmist prays, “Teach me your way, O Lord, and I will walk in your truth; give me an undivided heart, that I may fear your name” (Psalm 86:11).

An undivided heart.

A heart that is not pulled in different directions. A heart that is not confused about the way to go. A heart that is not affected by what we sometimes call “divided loyalties.” A heart that is open before God, responsive, attentive, trusting. A heart that leads to a life that is clear, calm, and focused.

In order for that to happen, God will need to perform a heart transplant in us. To use the images of Ezekiel 11, God will take our heart of stone – a cold, hard heart – and he will replace it with a heart of flesh – a warm, living heart. And the result of that spiritual transplant will be an undivided heart.

In Scripture, the heart is the seat of the will. The heart is where decisions are made and the course of action is determined. To have an undivided heart is to understand clearly what God desires *and* to be utterly committed to what God wants. God’s intention is for his people to have hearts that are alive, hearts that are able to be shaped, hearts that are sensitive, hearts that are in tune with him.

In a word, hearts that are undivided.

*Loving God,
I belong to you.
Do in me what you alone can do.
Take my cold, hard heart
and replace it with a heart
that is alive and soft and responsive.
Give me an undivided heart –
a heart that hungers for you,
a heart that cares about what you care about,
a heart that breaks for those who are broken.
I desire to be single-minded in my devotion to you,
and I know that only an undivided heart
can make that possible.
Give me that kind of heart.
Make me more like you.
Amen*

Questions for reflection:

1. In a childlike and innocent way, young Nik in Chapter Four reflects an undivided heart. He reads the words of the Great Commission and he simply assumes that those words apply to him! He hears the command to “go into all the world,” and he intuitively understands that this is a command intended for him! Even though he had no idea *how* that might happen, Nik takes God at his word. How do you respond when you encounter commands and instructions in Scripture? Are you eager to obey – or are you more interested in finding a way not to obey? Do you believe that those instructions are for you? Are you willing to take God at his word – or are you prone to explain why his instructions do not apply to you?
2. When you consider the opportunity to participate in the Great Commission, what is your reaction? Do you see this opportunity as a privilege to be embraced – or as a burdensome obligation that seems impossible? Has there ever been a time in your life when your response to God’s command to go was as eager and bright-eyed and innocent as Nik’s? What would it take for you to rekindle that childlike delight in God’s call?

Five: Broken by a Smile

A People Not Yet Born

Psalm 102:18-22

There comes a point when we go beyond the fact that the Great Commission is a command. There comes a point when we have been so changed by God that our hearts simply break for the lost and hurting people of our world. Perhaps we go merely because we have been told to go. Eventually, though, we go because our hearts have been broken by the things that break the heart of God.

Psalm 102:18 refers to “a people not yet created” or “a people not yet born.” The appeal here is to a future generation. The hope here is that people not yet born will be brought to the praise of God. The psalmist considers the groans of prisoners and those who have been condemned to death – and he looks forward to the day when helpless people (both helpless people today and helpless people in the future) will share in the worship and praise of God.

Psalm 22 – the psalm quoted by Jesus on the cross and the most commonly quoted psalm in the New Testament – ends with these words: “Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord. They will proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn – for he has done it” (Psalm 22:30-31).

The question might seem to be unnecessary, but why it is so very important for followers of Jesus to answer his call to go? Is it enough to go simply because he has told us to go? Certainly that is a true part of the story, and Jesus’ command provides us with plenty of motivation.

In addition to that, though, we go because our hearts are broken with lostness.

We grieve for those in our world who are lost – and we grieve for those yet to come. We go for those in our world who are lost – and we go for a people not yet born. We revel in the praise of God that happens today as the gospel spreads – and we long for the praise of God that will happen in the future . . . as God has his way. . . and as the hearts of his people are broken by the brokenness of this world.

In our last devotional entry, we talked about responsive and sensitive hearts. Responsive and sensitive hearts are filled with compassion. Responsive and sensitive hearts reflect the very compassion that we find in God.

*Gracious God,
overwhelm me with the needs of this broken world.
Then overwhelm me with your power to make things different.
You are able.
You are able to bring wholeness and hope and healing.
You are able to save.
You look at the world with profound compassion.
You know every name and every need.
Help me to look at the world in the same way.
Help me to respond to your call
not merely because I want to obey –
but also because my hearts breaks
for people created in your image.
My heart breaks
for people for whom Christ died.
You desire that no one be lost.
Give me passion for that same desire.
Amen*

Questions for reflection:

1. In Chapter Five, Nik tells the story of a tiny girl who touched his heart. He says that he was “broken by a smile.” What is it in our world that breaks your heart? What moves you to deep compassion? What motivates you to holy anger?
2. We cannot always be completely sure of our own personal motivations, but when you think of the Great Commission – are you moved more by the clarity of Jesus’ command or by the compassion for a lost and broken world that fills your heart?
3. Sometimes the needs of the world can overwhelm us. Surely the scene described by Nik in this chapter is nothing short of overwhelming. What can you do personally to make sure that overwhelming need does not result in inactivity in your life (because the need is simply too great)? Have you ever found yourself in a situation of need that was simply impossible? How did that feel – and how did you respond?

Sorrow Bearing

Matthew 5:4

Today's text is the second Beatitude. Jesus (as usual) surprises us and points out the blessedness of mourning. The mourning that Jesus calls to mind here can certainly apply to our mourning the loss of a loved one. It also can apply to the mourning that we do (and should do) for our own sin.

But the mourning that Jesus talks about here also applies to the mourning that we do on behalf of others.

Jesus is describing the condition of people with kingdom hearts. Among so many other characteristics, Jesus tells us that people who are part of God's kingdom mourn on behalf of others. Even more specifically, we mourn most for those who are not yet part of God's kingdom. We also mourn for broken and shattered lives. We grieve when we see hurt and pain and abuse and injustice. We grieve when we see children who do not have a chance. And we grieve when we grasp the fact that many people in our world have never had the opportunity to hear about Jesus. Yes, that is simply the way the world is – but that reality should never fail to break our hearts.

When Martin Luther was translating the Greek New Testament into his German language, he struggled with this second Beatitude. He was not exactly sure how to translate the words. What German word should he use to translate "mourn"? He settled on the German word *Leidtragen* – a word that literally means "sorrow-bearing." "Blessed are the sorrow-bearers!" Luther wrote. Blessed are those who bear their own sorrow – and the sorrow of others.

How wonderful that we, the people of God, should be known as sorrow-bearers. Scripture is clear in telling us that our mourning should be done in community. The apostle Paul tells us to weep with those who weep. We are plainly instructed in Galatians 6:2 to carry each other's burdens. What causes you pain is a deep concern to me, and what causes me pain affects you as well. Clearly, our mourning is done best in community.

Even more, we are told that God himself joins in our mourning. Describing the coming Messiah, Isaiah used this language: "Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows" (Isaiah 53:4). In his season of waiting for the Christ, Simeon was expecting

“the consolation of Israel” (Luke 2:25). Jesus is the One who has come to *console* his people. So when we grieve and mourn, we do that with one another – and we also do that with our Lord himself.

And graciously, Jesus says, “Blessed are those who mourn . . . for they will know the comfort of God.”

*God of all comfort,
I place the pain of my heart
and the pain of this entire world
into your able hands.
I grieve my own sin.
I grieve the sin of others.
I grieve the brokenness and heartache of this world.
I weep with those who weep.
I weep for those who do not know you.
I ask you to carry the brokenness and heartache
of the world –
brokenness and heartache that is too heavy for me.
Even so, help me to be a sorrow-bearer.
Give me the courage not to look away.
Give me the courage
to feel deeply and to care passionately.
Mostly, give me the courage to pray.
Help me to believe that you know
and that you care
and that you are able.
Amen*

Questions for reflection:

1. What will it mean for you to bear the sorrow – and to carry the burdens – of others? How can you do that when the sorrow is simply too great, too large, too grievous?
2. Having personally experienced the comfort of God, how can you share and communicate that comfort to those in pain?
3. In your own experience, what kind of comfort has been especially meaningful to you?

Six: God's Gift: Ruth

Maintaining Our Focus

Luke 4:14-30

In Luke 4, we read about an episode early in Jesus' public ministry. Just after the temptation story, Jesus returns to Nazareth (where he had been brought up). He goes to the synagogue on the Sabbath ("as was his custom"). The scroll of Isaiah is given to him to read. He unrolls the scroll and he reads what we know as Isaiah 62:1-2. "The Spirit of the Lord is on me . . ." the reading begins – and then the passage goes on to describe the ministry that Jesus will take on as his own.

After finishing the reading and rolling up the scroll, Jesus says, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

This is a dramatic moment. And what is perhaps most dramatic is the reaction of the people to what Jesus has said – and how quickly and how suddenly that reaction changes.

We are told in Luke 4:15 that, even before this day in the synagogue, "everyone praised him."

We are then told in Luke 4:22 that, after Jesus reads and comments on the passage from Isaiah, "all spoke well of him."

In the very same verse, we are told that "all were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips." ("Isn't this Joseph's son?" the people asked. In this context, that is a positive thing to say.)

Then, after some additional comments by Jesus, things begin to fall apart.

In Luke 4:28, we learn that "all the people in the synagogue were furious."

And then in Luke 4:29 – so quickly! – "they got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him down the cliff."

The changes in the story are so abrupt. At the most basic level, the story reminds us of how fickle human beings can be. We are the kind of people who chant “Hosanna” on Sunday – and a few days later chant, “Crucify him!”

Even beyond that painful observation, though, we notice how Jesus maintains his focus no matter what is happening around him. Whether he is being cheered or condemned, whether he is being praised or about to be thrown from a cliff, whether things are going well or not – Jesus cares only about doing the Father’s will. He is utterly focused on that one thing. And the reactions of those around him – positive or negative – are not able to pull him off course.

How wonderful it would be if we could live like that. How wonderful it would be if we could have that kind of single-minded focus!

*Almighty God,
I look to you –
and only to you.
Allow me to live with a healthy detachment
from those things that would cause me to be distracted.
What I care most about is following your will.
In doing that, help me to be done with lesser things.
Give me a sense of resolve.
Help me to maintain my focus.
Help me to be guided by that focus.
I desire to keep my eyes on you.
I desire to set my heart on you.
Amen*

Questions for reflection:

1. At the end of Chapter Six, Nik and Ruth experience a terrible episode – an event that could have easily distracted them from the call of God. Think of things that have happened in your life and in your walk that could have distracted you (or perhaps *did* distract you) from God’s call. How did you stay on course – or get back on course? What can you do even now to keep your focus on God and his call?
2. As you look back on your life, can you trace the hand of God in events and happenings? Was the activity of God clearly evident at the time – or is it much clearer now that time has passed?

Seven: “Take My Baby!”

Being Refined

Psalm 66

What we find happening in the world is often pretty hard to explain – but we really only have a few options. Interestingly, all of these options can be found in Scripture.

The first way of making sense of our world is to understand that the things that happen in life are the result of human choices and the brokenness of our world. God sometimes is content to let things play out. He is certainly involved, concerned, and connected – but sometimes he is hesitant to intervene directly. This explanation suggests that human beings cause many of the hard things that come – or that hard things simply happen because this is a fallen world. And that is one way to make sense of our world.

A second way of answering the question is to understand that hard things can be used by God for discipline and correction – and sometimes even punishment. Hard things can sometimes be seen as consequences for sinful behavior. We are told in Scripture that God’s discipline is proof of his love – so, as hard as it might be to accept, hard things that happen in the world might be related to God’s discipline or correction. And that is a second way to make sense of things that happen in our world.

A third way of answering the question is to understand that hard things are allowed by God – or even sent by God – to develop our character. This answer focuses less on the hard things that happen in this world – and more on how God can use those hard things for his purposes. Hard things are sometimes used by God to test us and to refine us. And that is yet another way of making sense of our world.

In Psalm 66, the psalmist seems to make a case for this third option: “For you, O God, tested us; you refined us like silver” (66:10). As simple as that sounds, there is still some question about whether or not the hard things are deserved – but there is absolutely no question about what God will do with those hard things. The psalmist believes that those

hard things are tests – and that God will use them to refine us. (The psalmist continues by saying: “**You**, God, brought us into prison and **you** laid burdens on our backs. **You** let men ride over our heads; we went through fire and water . . .” (66:11-12a). According to the psalmist, one way or another, God is ultimately in control of even the hard things that happen. Even more, God is using those hard things for his purposes.

The overall theme of Psalm 66 is ultimately a theme of restoration. But before arriving at a place of restoration (and “the place of abundance” mentioned in 66:12b), we are left to wonder about these hard things that God allows or causes – but always uses.

The three options mentioned above all have merit. Surely, the brokenness of our world has a lot to do with the hard things that happen. And though it might make us uncomfortable, the second option also has validity; consequences and even discipline have a part in the story. And based on Psalm 66, the third option carries substantial weight too.

Romans 5:3-5 comes to mind. Adding a few additional thoughts to the actual text, it reads something like this: *we also rejoice in sufferings (notice that there is no clue or hint here about the sources of those sufferings or about whether or not we deserve them), because we know that suffering (wherever it comes from) produces perseverance (a really good thing that can result from suffering); perseverance produces character (another really good result that can grow from suffering); and character, hope (yet another good thing – and if we read further in Romans 5, we learn that hope does not ever disappoint).*

Evidently, there is some refining going on. And if we can be sure of that – if we can truly believe that God is using all that happens to shape us and to help us grow – if we can see that God is maturing and purifying us – if we honestly *know* that those good things are happening through hard times – then we will be able to endure whatever might come.

Perhaps it does not matter quite so much where exactly the hard things come from. Perhaps it is enough to know that God will use them for his purposes.

For you, O God, tested us; you refined us like silver.

*O God,
forgive me
for thinking that I can understand your ways.
Forgive me
for imagining that I can make sense of my broken world.
And then, forgive me
for failing to see your hand at work in all that happens.
Even when my explanations fail,
teach me that you can use anything.
Use even suffering and persecution
and loss and heartache*

*for your refining purpose.
Use whatever is necessary to change me,
to shape me,
to make me more like you.
Honestly, God, I struggle to see
how you can use suffering for your purpose.
Still, I read in your word
that you are able to use suffering to refine me.
Have your way.
Amen*

Questions for reflection:

1. The stories that we read in Chapter Seven of *The Insanity of God* are gut wrenching, so grim and grievous that they are almost impossible to believe. There is no simple way to make sense of the pain and suffering that Nik and his team encounter. Nik himself uses the word “despair” to describe his feelings, and we can easily sense his deep frustration when even good effort leads to catastrophic results. How is it possible for God’s people – living in this kind of world – not to give in to despair? What keeps you from despair? Can you believe that God is using hard things to refine you – even when you cannot see evidence of that in the short term?
2. How has God refined you over the years? What has God used for his purposes in helping you grow and change? Can you see his activity today that was impossible to see earlier?
3. How do you feel about Nik and Ruth’s conversation with their boys? They boys were thirteen, eleven, and six years old at the time. Imagine hearing those words from your parents when you were thirteen, eleven, or six years old. Would those words have frightened you? Would they have challenged you? Would those words have helped you grow in your faith? Would those words have caused damage to your relationship with God? What would it mean for a family (or a church) to deal that honestly and openly with God’s costly call and the desire to be radically obedient to that call?

Eight: Mosquitoes Win

Free to Say Yes

Exodus 3:1 – 4:18

There are dozens of stories in the Bible that describe the call of God. Present in every one of those stories is the response of the person being called. Some people, such as Isaiah and Ezekiel, respond with willing submission – even enthusiasm: “Here I am, Lord! I am ready and willing!” Others, such as Gideon and Jeremiah – and especially Moses – have some concerns. In fact, they respond to God’s call by highlighting all the reasons that his call is not a good idea. God may yet find a way to use these people, but their first response is one of reluctance.

Isn’t it great to be called by God?

Well, Moses does not think so. We might typically think that God’s call is something to be celebrated – and surely, it is. But this call from God surfaces so many concerns and so many fears in Moses’ heart that he is not in a mood to celebrate. Moses, it turns out, is willing to settle for an easy success in Midian rather than risk a great failure in Egypt. In that way, Moses is much like us.

In Exodus 3 and 4, we find Moses offering at least five distinct reasons for rejecting God’s call.

First, Moses questions his own adequacy. “Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” Moses asks in Exodus 3:11. In this question, Moses is making the claim that he is not qualified for the task.

Second, Moses questions God’s adequacy (3:13). In essence, Moses says to God: “Who are you? Let’s say, hypothetically, that I go to Egypt. What do I say to the people when they ask, ‘Who sent you?’ and ‘What’s his name?’” Moses is already convinced that he is not up for the task – but here he wonders if God is!

Third, Moses claims (probably accurately) that the people will not listen to him (4:1). What Moses is being sent to do will be hard to defend in the presence of others – and he insists on pointing that out to God.

Fourth, Moses claims that he is not eloquent (4:10). He admits that he is slow of speech and tongue.

Finally, Moses desperately begs God to send somebody else (4:13).

And if those five excuses do not work for us, we likely have plenty more that we can use. Frankly, following the call of God is quite a bit of trouble. Following his call might mean that we will need to give up something. It might mean that we will be required to go to a new place. It might mean that we will need to persevere in an old place. Whatever the details, following God's call will require that we change.

The truth of the matter is that we have plenty of reasons for not following God's call.

Just like Moses, we have so many reasons to say No. And God has such high regard for human freedom, that he will allow us – and he will allow Moses – to say No to his call. God will let us say No.

But God also gives us the freedom to say Yes.

So we are not completely surprised by what we read next in the text: *Then Moses went back to Jethro his father-in-law and said to him, "Let me go back to my own people in Egypt"* (4:18).

What will it mean for Moses to go? It will mean heartache, profound cost, conflict, uprooting his family. It will mean every kind of threat. It will mean the distinct possibility of failure. It will mean all of that. And it will also mean . . . being part of what God is doing.

What happens to Moses can end up happening to us as well. We can choose to be caught up in God's activity not because all of our objections have been answered – or because we have finally been convinced – or even because we have listed all the pros and cons and discovered that the pros outweigh the cons. No, we can find ourselves caught up in God's activity because we have been moved, swept up in something holy and mysterious.

One day we are watching sheep in the desert . . . and the next day we are headed to Egypt. Maybe scared to death – but we realize that there is nowhere else we would choose to be.

God calls.

And there are so many reasons to say No. But in God's amazing grace, we are also free to say Yes.

*Frankly, God,
it is too much trouble for me to answer your call.
It is too much trouble for me to obey.
Saying Yes to you will cost me too much.
Answering your call might mean
that I will need to give up something.
It might mean that I will need to go.
It might mean that I will need to stay.
In any case,
answering your call will cause me to change.
Frankly, God,
I would rather things remain the same.
And yet . . . and yet . . .
I hear your voice.
And my excuses suddenly sound so empty and so vacant.
Despite my fear, I want so much to say Yes.
And I praise you for the freedom
that allows me to do just that.
I submit even my reluctance to you.
I am your servant.
My entire life –
my destiny –
is defined by your call.
Amen*

Questions for reflection:

1. Nik's naïve application of Matthew 28 is both humorous and deeply convicting. What excuses have you offered to God to try to avoid responding to his call? How has God dealt with the excuses that you have offered?
2. Even though Nik and Ruth had a wonderful season of ministry in Malawi, it was also a costly time for them and for their children. In particular, malaria proved to be an ongoing struggle. Does the reality of a high cost ever cause you to question the wisdom of following God's call? Do you ever assume that obedience *should* lead to an easy road? How does that perspective square with what you read in Scripture?

Preoccupied with Geography

Acts 1:8

It is easy to become preoccupied with place.

Even if we are convinced that God has a claim on our lives – and that his call applies to us – we often quibble with God about where we might or might not be willing to go.

Just before the Ascension, Jesus entrusts his followers with a mandate to share his good news close by and far away. From a single geographic center, Jesus invites his followers to take a broad view and to see the entire world.

Jerusalem is close by and familiar.

Judea stretches a little further out. Still, Judea is likely still very familiar.

Samaria is not very far away, but Samaria is different. We would even consider it “foreign.” Going there will require overcoming significant barriers.

And the ends of the earth? Well, the ends of the earth are so unreachable that we would probably consider going there simply impossible. Perhaps in Bible times, reaching the ends of the earth was quite literally impossible. Not so with us. Still, the ends of the earth are essentially impossible for us – not because of any geographic limitations, but because of our unwillingness to imagine that Jesus is utterly serious in saying that we should go there.

Still, our preoccupation with geography does us harm. When we answer God’s call by telling him up front about the places that we would never consider – and the needs that we could never address – and the conditions that will be required for our obedience – we already realize that we have started down the wrong path.

How much better simply to tell God that we are his, and that his command is clear, and that our obedience is certain – and that we will trust him to determine our place.

We might, in fact, have legitimate questions about *where* exactly we should go. But there can be no question whatsoever about *whether or not* we have been sent.

*God,
your vision is broad
and your plan is comprehensive.
You desire that all nations
bow before you in worship and submission.
You invite me to embrace that vision and that plan.
But my vision is too small.
I struggle to wrap my heart around your plan.
I want to argue about places and possibilities,
while you simply want my heart.
Help me to understand
that once I am settled about your call,
I am free to leave every other detail in your hands.
That scares me.
I am afraid that you might send me to the wrong place.
I am afraid that you might not honor my fears and my desires.
I am afraid that you might ignore my list of places that are off-limits.
And I see in those fears that I do not trust you as much as I claim.
Remind me that you know what is best for your plan.
Remind me that you know what is best for me.
Give me bigger eyes.
Give me a bigger heart.
Give me more trust.
Amen*

Questions for reflection:

1. In talking with the administrative committee, Nik claims that every follower of Jesus is told to go. His claim is based on the words of the Great Commission. Do you agree with Nik's claim? What are the implications of that claim for you and for your church? Are you, in fact, guilty of understanding missions in a way that allows some people to be disobedient to what Jesus has already commanded all of his followers to do?
2. Using the categories of Acts 1:8, what is your Jerusalem? What is your Judea? What is your Samaria? For you, what are the ends of the earth? What are the special challenges in your life related to going to each of those places?

Nine: Why Didn't I Just Keep My Mouth Shut?

At the Lord's Command

Numbers 9:19-23

One of the most difficult spiritual struggles we face is discerning when it is time to act and when it is time to wait. The scene described in Numbers 9 addresses that very struggle.

The first thing we notice in Numbers 9 is that the circumstances of the people are different day to day. Sometimes the people are expected to stay right where they are and simply to wait. Sometimes the people are expected to get up and go. Sometimes the time of waiting is long and extended; sometimes the season of waiting is relatively short. Day by day, the circumstances are different – and God's people cannot presume to know what might be expected of them next.

The second thing we notice is that God himself tells his people what to do. The repeated phrase in this passage is “at the Lord's command.” God does not expect his people to guess about the right course of action. God does not expect his people to rely solely on their wisdom and insight. Rather, as simplistic as it sounds, he tells them what to do. “At the Lord's command,” they sometimes stay put. And “at the Lord's command,” they sometimes set out.

The people in Numbers 9 are fortunate to have the visual image of the cloud that represents the presence of God. When the cloud remains over the tabernacle, the people understand that they should remain where they are. And when the cloud lifts, the people understand that they should move.

Generally speaking, we do not have an actual cloud to give us direction. But God assures his people – you and me – that he still leads. And God still makes it clear exactly when we should act and when we should wait. The internal witness of the Holy Spirit – that still, small voice – the powerful written word that cuts to the heart – the way that God speaks to and through the church – those, in a sense, are our “clouds.” Through those ways of communicating, God makes his way clear.

Sometimes we simply wait. At the Lord's command, we wait. (Exodus 14:14 and Isaiah 40:31 tell us that there are, in fact, seasons of waiting.) Sometimes we act boldly and decisively. At the Lord's command, we move. (Matthew 28:19-20 and many other passages tell us that there are seasons for quick and immediate action.)

Sometimes it is time to wait. Sometimes it is time to act.

And God promises to help us know exactly what time it is.

Doing something is good . . . if that is what God wants. Waiting is good . . . if that is what God wants. Whatever we do, we do "at the Lord's command."

*Lord God,
help me to know what time it is.
Help me to live each moment under your sway,
to be captive to your command.
When you tell me to be still,
I will be still.
And when you tell me that it is time to go,
I will go.
Give me ears that are eager to hear.
Give me a heart that is hungry to obey.
Give me a humble and submissive spirit.
You, Lord God, know what is best.
You know when I should wait.
You know when I should go.
Help me to see the many clouds of guidance
that fill my life.
Then, give me the courage to act
on what I see and what I hear.
Amen*

Questions for reflection:

1. In Chapter Nine of *The Insanity of God*, Nik describes the experience of moving from place to place under the clear guidance of God. If we read the chapter carefully, we see that Nik discerns that guidance in several different ways. (For example, God seems to guide Nik and Ruth through circumstances, through the wise counsel of others, through the spiritual needs of the lost, through Scripture, through the internal witness of the Holy Spirit, and in other ways.) How do you experience the guidance of God? Using the image of Numbers 9, what are some of "the clouds" that help you know the way to go? Specifically, how do you figure out when it is time to wait and when it is time to act?

-
2. For Ruth and Nik, reading the Book of Acts (again!) proved to have a dramatic impact on their spiritual journey. Are there portions of Scripture that have had that kind of significant impact on you? What parts of Scripture do you *return* to during seasons of decision and struggle and growth?

The Trouble with Bold Claims

Ezra 8:15-23

It was the responsibility of Ezra the scribe to lead God's people back to Jerusalem after a time of exile. Ezra had made bold public claims about God's ability to protect his people and to provide for their every need. When it was time to start the journey back to Jerusalem, however, Ezra and the people began to sense how dangerous the journey would be. At that point, Ezra wanted very much to seek help from the king. And it is likely that the king would have provided soldiers to protect Ezra and his people.

But Ezra had already made bold claims about God's ability to provide.

Because of that, Scripture tells us that "he was ashamed to ask the king for soldiers and horsemen" (8:22). Ezra was *appropriately* bound by his bold claims! Imagine the thoughts in Ezra's mind: "If God is able to do all that I have said, then why would I need to seek help in other places? And if God is not able to do that, then why did I make my bold claims in the first place?"

If we had been in Ezra's situation, we might have risked embarrassment – and asked for the king's help anyway. Even more likely, we might have been less bold (or at least less public!) with our original claims. But Ezra was trapped by his boasts; since he had already claimed that God would take care of everything, how could he now ask the king for help?

Ultimately, Ezra did not ask the king for help. He decided, instead, to trust God.

Our bold claims box us in. We claim that God can do anything. We claim that God can take care of us. We claim that God is powerful. We claim that God leads his people.

Even further, we claim that we will do whatever he asks us to do. We claim that we will go wherever he leads. We claim that we will follow Jesus no matter the cost.

Then, in moments of doubt and fear and confusion . . . we wonder why we said those good things.

The point, however, is *not* to stop making the claims. If anything, our claims about God's greatness and about our settled intention to walk with him should probably be even bolder – and even more public. The point is to follow through on the claims we make.

Ezra is a shining example of courage and fortitude. Even if he regretted his earlier words about God's ability to protect, Ezra honored the words that he had spoken. As he tells the story, "We had already told the king, 'The gracious hand of our God is on everyone who looks to him'" (8:22).

Because of his bold claim, Ezra and people fasted and petitioned God about this. And God answered their prayer (8:23). Ezra's claims about God proved to be true. He was completely justified in his faith.

God probably loves it when he hears us making our bold claims – bold claims about him and bold claims about our commitment to his call.

But he loves it even more when our claims are confirmed by the way we live our lives.

*God of Power and Grace,
you hear every word that I say.
Even more, you know every thought that I think.
And you know when my words and my thoughts
mirror my life –
and when they do not.
Lord God, I make bold claims about you and your power.
I tell the world that you are able.
But it is often hard to honor those claims in the way I live.
I also make bold claims about my commitment to you.
I tell others that I will do anything
that you ask me to do.
Anything!
And that bold claim often makes me a liar.
Forgive me for failing to live out
what I know to be true.
Help me to be like Ezra –
actually ashamed to back down
because of what I have already said.
Help me to make even bolder claims
about you and about my love for you.
Then help me to live out those claims
with integrity and consistency and courage.
Amen*

Questions for reflection:

1. In a very real sense, Nik and Ruth were boxed in by their expressed willingness to follow God's call. They had offered their obedience to God without conditions. Now, they were being led to a difficult and dangerous

setting. How costly might it be for you to tell God that you are willing to do whatever he calls you to do? If you knew beforehand exactly where God would lead you, would you say Yes to his call anyway? Why or why not?

2. Have you ever found yourself in a situation similar to the situation of Ezra? Have you ever made bold claims (either about God or about your commitment to God) that boxed you in? If you have had that experience, did it cause you to hold back on your claims moving forward – or, at least, to take your claims more seriously?

Ten: Just Show Up

Not Competent

1 Corinthians 2:1-5 and 2 Corinthians 3:1-6

It is not generally a badge of honor to be incompetent.

Sometimes we feel incompetent because we lack the proper preparation or training. At other times, we feel incompetent because the surrounding situation is impossibly difficult. It is also possible that sometimes we are actually not quite as incompetent as we *feel*. Whatever the specific circumstances, however, incompetence is an uncomfortable place to be – and most of us are miserable if we sense that we cannot handle what has been put in front of us.

Much to our surprise, many Bible heroes felt that same thing. The apostle Paul is a prime example. In his letters to the church at Corinth, Paul reflects on his state of mind when he first arrived in Corinth. Having just experienced a difficult and challenging time in Athens (Acts 17:16-34), Paul arrives in Corinth rather humbled and defeated. In his own words, “I came to you in weakness and fear, with much trembling” (1 Corinthians 2:3). Building on that same theme, Paul later admits to the Corinthians that he is not competent in his own power – but that his competence comes from God (2 Corinthians 3:5). It is not the Paul is unable to complete the task that God has placed in his hands – but Paul understands clearly that his own ability and strength and wisdom are not sufficient for the task at hand.

Paul’s attitude provides healthy guidance for those of us who take pride in our own ability. Many of us have been taught that no challenge is too great and that no problem is too large. If we try hard enough, we tend to believe, surely we can deal with anything that comes our way. And while our self-reliance seems commendable, the brokenness of our world puts us on our knees – and we eventually admit our own inadequacy and we plead for God to intervene with his power. That posture may be uncomfortable, but it is actually a perfect place to be: fully aware that we are not competent in ourselves and even more aware that our competence comes from God.

To say that we are not competent is no great concession. It is an obvious truth.

And once we admit it, we find ourselves in a perfect place for God to work with us and in us and through us.

*Strong and Kind God,
you are able.
You can do what I cannot do.
I am weak.
I do not have the answers.
In myself, I am not competent
to handle the weight of this broken world.
I see needs that I cannot fix.
I see heartache that I cannot heal.
I see problems that are frustrating and complex.
In myself, I am not competent.
But you are able.
You are wise.
You have power.
You can take weak vessels and use them for a mighty purpose.
You can use even me.
Help me to be confident in your strength.
Work through me to do what I cannot do.
Teach me that you are more than sufficient.
Remind me that my weakness
need not limit what you can do.
Amen*

Questions for reflection:

1. Have you ever found yourself facing unbearable, incomprehensible need? Chapter Ten in *The Insanity of God* describes a staggering humanitarian crisis – but sometimes the needs we might face seem just as overwhelming. Perhaps it is a broken relationship or conflict in a church family or financial need. Even on a smaller scale, such need can be crippling. What do you do in the face of need that you cannot easily fix? What do you do when your natural abilities reach their limit? What do you do when you do not know what to do?
2. When we feel inadequate, it is easy to conclude that we can do nothing to help. How do you prevent your personal feelings of inadequacy from immobilizing you? How do you avoid thinking that “because I cannot do everything, I cannot do anything”? What are small, personal steps that you can take in the presence of great need – even when you feel inadequate?

Staying at Our Post

Isaiah 21:6-10

The watchman is posted – and he is told to watch. It is a tedious assignment – tedious because normally there is nothing to report. Every day is like every other day. The assignment is simply to watch. Most days, nothing happens.

Then, one day, something is different. One day, word comes that Babylon has fallen (21:9). The watchman is stunned: “Surely, it is not possible for Babylon to fall because Babylon is strong. Babylon will last forever!” Still, the message has come and the message is clear – Babylon has fallen. In response to this impossible news, the watchman speaks to the people and he tells them what has happened (21:10).

It is a dramatic message to proclaim. As dramatic as it is, though, it comes after a long, long season of . . . doing very little. The watchman . . . watches. That is all the watchman does. The watchman waits. The watchman observes. The watchman shows up. Most days, he probably wonders exactly why he shows up. But he shows up – and evidently, that small thing – just showing up – matters.

Most of us would like to do great things. Most of us would like to do things that will cause us to be remembered. Most of us are not really interested in investing our lives in simply showing up. But as small as it is, the work of the watchman matters. Somehow, he is willing to pour his life into this small thing. He watches and he waits – not really because something great is bound to happen one day – but simply because showing up is his assignment.

The measure of the watchman’s life is that he can say this: “Day after day, my lord, I stand on the watchtower; every night I stay at my post” (21:8).

When it is all said and done, our hope is that we will be able to say . . . that we did exactly what our Lord called us to do. No more. And certainly no less. If our assignment is simply to stay at our post – if our assignment is to watch and to wait – then we are wise to choose to be faithful to that assignment.

It is easy to tell the Potter how we might be better used. But we are not the Potter. Which is why the watchman says, “I will stand on the watchtower and I will stay at my post.”

That is the true measure of a life of faithfulness.

*Creator God,
I belong to you.
You are free to use me however you see fit.
Sometimes it is your purpose
that I simply show up.
In response to that purpose,
I accept my assignment
gladly, joyfully, without complaint.
You the Potter.
I am the clay.
Mold me and make me.
Have your way.
Despite my opinions and preferences,
I choose not to question you and your ways.
Instead, when I wake up every morning,
my first thought is this:
I belong to you!
That truth, that identity, that certainty, that gift –
defines all that I am and all that I do.
Amen*

Questions for reflection:

1. Chapter Ten of *The Insanity of God* is entitled “Just Show Up.” In your own life, what tempts you most not to stay at your post? Is it because your assignment is too small or too great? Is it because you feel that your gifts are not being adequately used? Is the work that you have been given too tedious or too challenging? What is it exactly that helps you to show up and stay at your post?
2. At the end of Chapter Ten, we read these words: “We made a conscious choice to be salt and light in a place gone mad. And we prayed that, somehow, the light would shine in the midst of this dark insanity.” In the face of such overwhelming need, would you be willing to make that same claim? What do you think it was that kept Nik and his team committed to their work? What is it that would help you remain committed to your work?

Eleven: Bubba Sings

Having the Right Spirit

1 Peter 3:8-12

So much of Scripture is intended to help us become the kind of people God wants us to be. Even as we strive to follow laws and guidelines, God's deeper desire is that we become people who will simply reflect his heart and his character. In today's passage from 1 Peter, we encounter attitudes and behaviors that are fitting for God's people: unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, compassion, humility, and forgiveness. That kind of character will surely make itself known in our living day by day.

In Isaiah 11, one of the great Messianic passages, there is a description of "the shoot that will come up from the stump of Jesse," "a Branch that will bear fruit" (Isaiah 11:1). We are told in this passage that this Promised One will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears. Instead, he will judge this way: "The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him – the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord – and he will delight in the fear of the Lord" (Isaiah 11:2-3). The "Spirit" referred to in those verses is the very Spirit of God. And it that same Spirit of God that empowers and makes possible the right spirit that exemplifies all of those who live as God's children. This remarkable description of the Messiah that we find in Isaiah 11 should, in a derivative way, come to describe every one of his followers.

We can sometimes become obsessed with doing the right things, with making the right decisions, with being in the right place, with providing the right answers. And those things are all very important.

Perhaps more important is having the right spirit. Only in having the right spirit will we be able to do the right things and make the right decisions and be in the right place and provide the right answers.

More than anything else, we need to strive to be the kind of people God wants us to be.

*Great God,
I long to have the right spirit within me.
I long for you to have your way with me
so that I might be the kind of person you want me to be.
Today, I am not where I want to be.
Today, I am not fully the person you want me to be.
I do not fully have a new and right spirit within me.
But I want you to have your way.
Continue to change me.
I hunger for unity.
I desire to have a heart of sympathy.
I want to love others more completely.
I long for a deeper compassion.
I thirst for humility.
I want to forgive even as I have been forgiven.
Great God,
you can make these things happen in my heart.
Give me a new and a right spirit.
Amen*

Questions for reflection:

1. The central story of Chapter Eleven reveals the heart and character of a man named Bubba. Bubba seems to have the right spirit. Both his attitude toward people – and his love for God – seem to mirror the words of both 1 Peter 3:8-12 and Isaiah 11:2-4a. Using those passages as a guide, how are you doing? Do you have the right spirit? Is God having his way with you? Even as you grow in your desire to obey God’s call – and to go out on mission – what is the condition of your character? Do you live in harmony with other people? Are you sympathetic? Do you love the family of faith? Are you compassionate? Are you humble? Do you practice forgiveness? Ask God to bring to mind areas where growth might be needed. Do you understand how profoundly these behaviors and attitudes affect your witness?
2. Can you understand Nik’s fear that all of his effort was not making any difference? Have you ever felt that way about your effort? Have you ever longed to see clear evidence that what you were doing mattered? How would you have encouraged Nik if he had come to you with his concerns?

Twelve: Tears for Somaliland

The Day of Small Things

Zechariah 4:1-10

In 538 B.C., King Cyrus (who had recently conquered Babylon) issued a decree that allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. The Jews had been in exile – and they were now being allowed to return home. Led by Zerubbabel, about fifty thousand Jews headed home. What they discovered when they arrived there was devastating. Their beloved temple, of course, had been completely destroyed. Resolute, they started rebuilding.

About two years later, they had completed the foundation for the new temple. When enemies saw what was happening, they opposed the work and it ground to a halt. Haggai and Zechariah were prophets who lived at that time – and they encouraged God’s people to get back to work. These prophets were certainly interested in spiritual renewal, but they focused their attention on encouraging the people to start building again.

In Zechariah 4, the prophet assures the people that Zerubbabel will indeed finish the work – and he tells them that this success will be a sign of God’s presence among them (4:9).

Zechariah then says this: “Who despises the day of small things? Men will rejoice when they see the plumb line in the hand of Zerubbabel” (4:10).

Who despises the day of small things?

That is an interesting question. Who despises the day of small things? One answer might be that everyone does! We all despise the day of small things! We typically dismiss small things – and we assume that we can determine which things are big and which things are small. Normally, we are much more impressed with big things! Significantly, as the new temple was being built, some of the older people who had seen the original temple wept because the new temple did not quite measure up to that incredible old structure (Ezra 3:12 and Haggai 2:3). They felt terribly disappointed because what was now being built was not very impressive.

Generally, almost everybody despises the day of small things. But we probably would be wise not to. Small things suggest beginnings . . . and most big things start with small things. Ultimately, it is foolish to despise the day of small things. And that is profoundly true with the activity of God. After all, we know what God can do with a simple prayer. Or with two or three people gathered in his name. Or with a mustard seed. Or with one simple act of kindness. Or with some children. Or with one sincere decision to follow Jesus. Just a bunch of small things that God can take and use to build his kingdom.

There is a wonder in small things. When the people of God see small things, we should probably pay very close attention. It means that God himself is at work.

*God of Possibility,
forgive me for being so easily impressed
with the big and the beautiful.
You seem much more interested
in things of no account.
You seem much more interested
in people of no account.
Honestly, it often looks like utter failure to me.
I am almost certain that it will all amount to nothing.
But my faulty assessment
ignores your power
and belittles your startling creativity.
Set me free to believe –
to believe you –
and to believe in what you can do.
Take all these small things
that are almost invisible to me
and make of them
your kingdom.
Take all of these discounted people
who are almost invisible to me
and make of them your family.
In your grace, include me too –
for I am very small.
Amen*

Questions for reflection:

1. What are some of the small things in your life and in your church that God might be using to do a great work? In reading Chapter Twelve, can you identify some small things that Nik and his team might have discounted – but small things that might have been deeply honored and greatly used by God?

2. Nik makes a point in this chapter of saying that his prayer time and his personal relationship with God were crucial to his survival and ministry. Do you ever look at your prayer time, or your personal relationship with God, as optional? Are you ever tempted to “let that go” because you are involved in more pressing matters? How can you be certain to keep that central part of your walk *central*?

Moving the Stones

John 11:17-44

The story of John 11 captures a scene of painful loss. At the same time, at least for those of us who know how the story ends, the scene is one of startling hope. Obviously, the characters in the Bible story do not know what Jesus is about to do next. But we know. He is about to raise Lazarus from the dead.

Before he does that, though, he says, “Take away the stone” (11:38). That simple detail – that word of instruction – is extremely important. Jesus knows that there are things that he alone can do. But he also knows that there are things that we can do. Here, he essentially invites us to play our part.

As the story unfolds, we see that Martha has some valid reasons for not removing the stone. “It’s going to smell bad,” she says. “This will be ugly. This will get complicated. This will not be neat and tidy. Frankly, Jesus, this will be a big mess.” But Jesus simply says – and he says it quite simply, “Take away the stone.”

In other words, “You do what you can do – and I will then do what I alone can do!”

Take away the stone!

We marvel at all that Jesus can do. For some reason, though, he loves to draw us into his work. He loves to see us play our part. Even when we cannot understand exactly what he is doing – and even when we have good reasons not to get involved – Jesus continues to invite.

“Yes, I know all about the smell and the mess,” Jesus says. “But move the stone anyway. You do what you can do. And then watch and see what I can do.”

*Miracle-working God,
give me the courage to join in.
Forgive me for being so sure
about how exactly things will turn out.
Forgive me for being so sure
about the end of the story.*

*Help me to see the grace
in your invitation –
your invitation to come along,
to join in,
to play my part.
I know that you do not need my help.
But what grace there is in your desire
that I help you anyway!
Like a child “helping” a parent,
I will joyfully overcome my excuses
and I will do just what you say.
Thank you for allowing me to share in activities
that open doors for your miracles.
Amen*

Questions for reflection:

1. What are some things that Jesus alone can do? Then, what are some things that Jesus graciously invites you to do?
2. Nik describes the role of Ruth in the ministry in glowing terms. Generally, she had the difficult assignment of remaining home in Kenya while Nik continued his travel into difficult and dangerous settings. Do you find it more difficult to serve in a difficult setting – or to support someone else serving in that setting? Why?

Thirteen: Broken and Poured Out

Remembering Well

Joshua 4:1-9

The previous devotional entry focused on the image of moving stones so that God might work. In today's entry, we once again encounter the image of stones. Today's passage calls us to the crucial work of remembering.

After forty years of difficult struggle, after forty years of only occasional faithfulness, after forty years of failure upon failure – the children of Israel are *finally* ready to enter the Land of Promise. God has been faithful. God has fulfilled his promises. Now, finally, the children of Israel stand on the banks of the Jordan River.

Designated priests carry the Ark of the Covenant to the edge of the river. With their next step, they enter the water – and when they touch the water, it stops flowing. God's people walk into the Land of Promise on dry ground (surely eliciting memories of another “dry ground crossing” that happened when they first left Egypt).

As a memory, a sign, and a symbol of this important day, Joshua commands the people to take twelve river rocks from the Jordan and pile them up on the other side. At first glance, this is simply a pile of twelve non-descript river rocks. But we understand that those rocks are so much more than that.

We claim that we will never forget. Sadly, however, we *do* forget. In fact, as human beings, we are especially prone to forget. And if we are not careful, we will forget even the glow of God's glorious activity.

In that moment of forgetfulness, as the story in Joshua 4 is told, a child will notice that pile of river rocks. Quite innocently, the child will ask a question: *Momma, Papa, what do these stones mean?*

And at the simple question, the entire world will grow still. We can imagine the child's parents bending down to answer the question. Perhaps others would gather around while the story of God's activity was recited and recounted. Both in the telling of the story and in the hearing of the story, God would grant the gift of his presence.

God seems to take special interest in commanding his people to remember – and God seems eager to provide his people with ways to help them remember.

A pile of rocks. An Ebenezer stone. A rainbow.

A loaf of bread. A cup.

What do these river rocks mean?

They mean that God has acted to save his people. They mean that God has been true to his word. They mean that God has done the impossible.

And what does this bread mean?

It means that God has provided for our every need. It means that God has saved us. It means that God will never leave us or forsake us. It means that God has put our sin as far as the east is from the west.

And what does this cup mean?

It means that God loves us with an everlasting love. It means that God himself has paid a debt that we can never pay. It means that God has been faithful, and that he has purified us from all unrighteousness. It means that we have been adopted as sons and daughters of God?

We claim that we will never forget. But we do forget. So God tells us to keep looking at the pile of river rocks.

He tells us to keep eating the bread. He tells us to keep drinking the cup.

Though we are a forgetful people, God himself will help us remember.

*Lord God,
I say that I will never forget.
But that is simply not true.
I do forget.
I have forgotten.
Only with great effort do I remember even important things.
Yet, I dare not forget what you have done.
Thank you for calling me to remembrance.
And thank you for providing me
with living pictures that call me back to you.
When I see a rainbow,
I think of your promises.*

*When I see a pile of rocks,
I think of the impossible things that you have done.
When I see the bread,
I remember your grace.
When I see the cup,
I am overwhelmed by your love.
Lord God,
fill my life with holy symbols
that simply shout your presence
into my stopped-up ears . . .
so that I might always remember
and never forget.
Amen*

Questions for reflection:

1. How might the Lord's Supper change for you . . . if, every time you observe it, you call to mind the four Somali believers described in Chapter Thirteen?
2. How can you keep holy symbols (events such as the Lord's Supper and baptism) from becoming routine and meaningless? It is one thing to remember; it is another thing altogether to remember *meaningfully*. Can you imagine the scene and setting of the observance of the Lord's Supper described in this chapter of *The Insanity of God*? What would it be like to share the Lord's Supper in fear? Or to share the Lord's Supper in hiding? Or to know that simply sharing in the Supper could quickly lead to severe and costly persecution?
3. Chapter Thirteen also highlights the distinction between the physical needs of people and their spiritual needs. Nik says at one point: "In terms of the physical needs of Somaliland, our team was having an amazing impact! When I considered the spiritual needs of the Somalis, however, my assessment of our efforts was not as positive." Later, Nik gives voice to several sobering questions: "How is it possible to give bold verbal witness to Jesus in a country where sharing Jesus is against the law? How is it possible to lead friends to become followers of Christ knowing that their newfound faith could lead to their deaths?" How do you answer those hard questions?

Fourteen: Too Great a Cost

Desperate

Psalm 86:1-4

Psalm 86 is traditionally ascribed to David, and this psalm reveals David's profound confidence in God. This psalm is not quite as anguished and emotional as some other psalms; in fact, this psalm is rather calm, ordered, measured. David is very clear about his need – and he is just as clear about God's ability to intervene, act, rescue, and help. As simple as it sounds, those are probably the two things we need to be *most* clear about: our need and God's ability to help.

In Psalm 86, David does not tell God what to do. He does not tell God how exactly to address his need; he does not advise God how to heal his hurt. David simply asks for help. Often, we tend to tell God what he should do. Often, we assume that we know what is best and what ought to happen. David, on the other hand, admits that his own perspective is limited – so he is content leaving things in God's hands. Yes, he is clear about his need. But he leaves it at that. He simply asks for help and he has complete confidence in God's wisdom, love, and power.

It is also instructive that, in Psalm 86, David does not base his request of God on any special standing that he has.

The heart and soul of David's plea is simply this: "I am poor and needy." David, in essence, says: "Lord God, I am desperate for your help. And you are my only hope."

In this simple cry, David has provided a good example for every poor and needy person.

What do we do when we are in trouble? We cry out to the Lord. We follow David's example and we say: "I am poor and needy. And you, Lord God, are my only hope."

*Merciful God,
I am poor and needy.
I am desperate for your help.*

*You are my only hope.
There is not much else to add to that.
I could remind you that I am your child.
I could recount your provision in the past.
I could specify exactly what I think you should do.
But I choose not to do any of those things.
Today, my prayer is simple and short.
I am poor and needy.
I am desperate for your help.
Merciful God,
you are my only hope.
Amen*

Questions for reflection:

1. How do you deal with failure? And can you entertain the possibility that what you call “failure” might be seen by God in a very different way? We normally measure “success” in ministry and missions by counting people and decisions. Nik found himself in a situation where he essentially had nothing to count. What does God consider “success” and what does God count as “failure”?
2. Are you comfortable being desperate before God? Is it really possible to be desperate before God when you still have “safety nets” available? What would it feel like for God *literally* to be your only hope? Are you willing to live in that desperate place?
3. Think back earlier in the book when Nik talked about his work in Malawi (Chapter Eight). Nik described there a ministry that was “successful” according to traditional categories of conversions, baptisms, and churches planted. How do you think that earlier experience played into Nik’s feelings and struggles as he tried to make sense of a very different experience in Somalia when “success” was impossible to identify?

Wasted Years

Exodus 2:11 – 3:4

One theme that has already surfaced repeatedly in *The Insanity of God* is the theme of God's unusual ways. Even as we quote the words of Isaiah 55:8, we struggle to understand exactly how unusual God's ways are.

Today, consider God's strange sense of timing.

In his recounting of God's activity, Stephen in Acts 7:23 tells us that Moses is forty years old when he leaves Egypt and arrives in the wilderness. Exodus 7:7 tells us that Moses is eighty years old when he returns to Egypt. Working with those numbers, we are inclined to describe the forty years in the middle of Moses' life as *forty wasted years*. For forty years, Moses takes care of sheep in the wilderness.

Forty years is a long time to take care of sheep in the wilderness! Not that Moses has any other plans, of course. As far as he knows at the time, taking care of sheep in the wilderness is all there will ever be for him.

But God knows far more than Moses knows. And Moses – and we – will come to understand that those forty years are not wasted at all. Moses does not know it at the time, of course, but he is being prepared for heroic work during those forty years. We can barely get our minds around a period of time as long as forty years, but God is working in invisible ways that entire time.

The Bible often speaks of “the fullness of time.” In the fullness of time, God works and God speaks and God acts and God reveals himself. In the fullness of time, God shows up. In the fullness of time, God keeps his promises.

For our part, we tend to describe things in other ways. We refer to detours, delays, interruptions, and wilderness times. We quickly refer to some seasons as “wasted” time. We carelessly assume that the extended season of waiting – the time in the wilderness – is wasted.

We are almost certain that all the waiting is keeping us . . . from what exactly? Probably, we see those times as keeping us from where we think we ought to be.

Wasted time. Wilderness time.

But God has such a different perspective. He sees all time as . . . his time. He sees all time as useful time. That waiting time might be a time of preparation for something that comes next – or it might not be that at all – but God still sees it as useful time, time that he can take and shape for his purposes.

We can only wonder how Moses actually feels about his forty years of watching the sheep. Eventually, though, he surely comes to understand that those forty years were not wasted at all. In the fullness of time, God came to Moses. In the fullness of time, God acted. In the fullness of time, God used Moses to set his people free. In the fullness of time, Moses finally became the man that God needed him to be.

Once we come to understand God’s strange sense of timing, we will choose to wait and to watch – even when it seems that nothing is happening. We will wait for God to work even if we have to wait forty years.

“This is all taking too long!” we sigh.

And God simply says: “Watch. Wait. See what will happen next.”

*Holy God,
I am impatient.
I loathe waiting.
I especially hate to wait
when I cannot see anything happening.
I know exactly what you should do
and I know when you should do it.
Forgive me for my pride.
Then, slow me down.
Silence my busy mind and my impulsive thoughts.
Humble me before your wisdom.
And remind me that you have time well in hand.
Do what you desire to do
in your time.
Forgive my foolish words;
help me not to call “a waste”
something that you intend to bless.
I will find it a struggle, to be sure,
but I will watch sheep for forty years
if that is part of your plan.
Calm my anxious heart.
Teach me the way of quiet trust
and peaceful confidence in you.
Amen*

Questions for reflection:

1. At this point in the story, Nik likely felt that he has wasted so much energy and time in a work that had produced very little fruit. How would you have counseled Nik if you had talked with him during that season of his life?
2. Are there parts of your life story that you see as “wasted” times? In light of Moses’ story, can you now see God’s hand at work in those times?
3. What should you do when you find yourself in a wilderness kind of time? Where should you place your focus? How should you pray during that kind of season?

Fifteen: When Your Best Is Not Enough

Trusted with a Silence

John 11:1-16

These verses in John 11 provide the prelude for Jesus' dramatic raising of Lazarus from the dead. In this stunning miracle, Jesus reveals his power (over even death), and he demonstrates deep compassion for the people he loves.

What is perhaps most striking in the story, however, is Jesus' delay in going to Lazarus. For most of us, his delay is unsettling. There is a specific need – and Jesus obviously cares – and he can certainly do something about the need – but, after hearing that Lazarus is sick, Jesus *stays where he is two more days*.

Bible scholars are quick to explain that Jesus has his reasons for delaying – that Jesus knows exactly what he is doing by staying where he is for two more days – that he has a bigger purpose in mind. And those explanations are strong and convincing. Still, that two-day delay is unsettling.

Christian writer Oswald Chambers had some interesting observations about this passage. He wrote this: “Has God trusted you with a silence – a silence that is big in meaning? Think of those days of absolute silence in the home at Bethany! Is there anything like that in your life today? God's silence is the sign that he is bringing you into a marvelous understanding of himself. If God has trusted you with a silence, praise him, for he is inviting you to understand his purposes more completely” (*My Utmost for His Highest*).

As we walk with God, there are many times when God is very close. *Thankfully*, there are many times when he is very close. But there are also times when God seems painfully silent. In those times of silence, we might wonder what we have done wrong. (And it is a possibility that we have done something wrong!)

Still, Oswald Chambers' suggestion is another possibility. Could it be that God is trusting us with a silence? God's silence may not, in fact, be an indication that we have done something wrong.

God's silence may, instead, be an indication that God is about to do something new.

*Sometimes-silent God,
I am uncomfortable when you are quiet.
I am relieved to know
that you might trust me with a silence,
but I have a hard time trusting you with silence!
I am forever in a hurry.
I am in a hurry to have an answer.
I am in a hurry for things to be different.
I am in a hurry to have my hurts healed.
So I want you to speak – now.
I want you to act – soon.
I am unsettled by the two-day delays
and the delays that are much longer than that.
And I am especially unsettled
by your silence as that time passes.
I know that you will speak
when the time is right.
Give me the grace to wait
calmly
until that right time.
Amen*

Questions for reflection:

1. Consider these words from Chapter Fifteen again: “For perhaps the first time in my life, I was dealing with something that I could not fix. Prayer and obedience and hard work and good training and godly intentions and sacrifice – none of it seemed to make a difference.” Later in the same paragraph, Nik says this: “I am embarrassed to admit it now, but I even wondered if maybe this problem was too big for God.” What problems in your life, right now, seem “too big for God”? Are you willing to place those problems in his hands?
2. You might be encouraged to know (using Oswald Chambers’ words) that God will trust you with a silence – but do you trust him in his silence? What do you do when God seems quiet? Do you tend to walk away, do you wait and hope that the silence ends, or do you dig deeper into your relationship with God?
3. The stories of missionaries are very different. Some stories are marked by visible and remarkable expressions of God’s activity. Other stories are

characterized by very little in the way of visible results. Occasionally, we read about missionaries who labored for years without seeing one person respond to the gospel. At the end of this chapter, Nik honestly asks: “Had our efforts been worth the time, the money, and the energy invested? Was this worth the price that we had paid?” How do you determine if your efforts and your sacrifices are worth the price?

Sixteen: Death Follows Me Home

Devastating Losses

Job 1:1-22

The Book of Job is a weighty and challenging part of Scripture. The opening scene of the book involves a heavenly court. In that heavenly court, an accuser appears and argues that Job, a shining example of a righteous man, is devoted to God only because God has blessed him so richly. The suggestion is made that, if Job's blessings were to be taken away, he would immediately turn his back on God. As the story is told, God essentially says, "Let's see if that is true." And God allows all manner of difficult and devastating losses to come into Job's life.

The first chapter of Job is painful to read. One heartache after another quickly comes upon Job. And even as he tries to absorb all the terrible news, this is his assessment and his reaction:

At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship and said: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised" (Job 1:20-21).

Despite our protests, Job evidently believes that it is God's right – and fully within his power – both to give and to take away. And even while there is a drama unfolding in the heavenly realm that Job knows nothing about, there is also a drama unfolding within Job's own heart. And the questions of that struggle are eternally significant. *What exactly is in Job's heart? What is Job made of? Who does Job belong to?*

What Job does in the face of all these devastating losses is revealing.

First, Job grieves – and he grieves deeply. He tears his robe and he shaves his head. He honestly acknowledges what has happened and he admits how much it hurts. He expresses both his fear and his doubt. Job grieves.

Second, Job worships. He falls to the ground in submission. He tells the truth about God. He offers God his praise. Job points to God's presence even in his deep pain. Job

celebrates some unseen purpose that is impossible to name. And he holds God close even in this grievous moment.

The devastations that come into our lives are clarifying; they make things clear. Even more, those devastations force us to decide what we will do next.

In Job's case, he grieves and he worships. He is utterly honest about his broken heart. And he keeps God in the conversation even while he wonders if God is still there.

Job tears his robe and he shaves his head. He falls to the ground in worship.

He says, "I started with nothing – and I will leave with nothing. The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord."

*God of Mystery,
my life is just a breath.
The ground beneath my feet is not solid.
The things that I tightly hold
crumble in my hand.
Even the people I love
go away.
The enemies that I fight
often seem more real than you.
And devastating losses are just that –
they are devastating.
These losses crush me.
These losses rob me of hope.
These losses cause me to want to walk away from you.
Yet Job shows me another way.
In my losses,
I will do what Job does.
I will tell the truth about my pain.
And, God of Mystery,
I will praise your name.
I will look to you –
even when I cannot see you.
Through my tears,
I will say:
"May the name of the Lord be praised!"
Amen*

Questions for reflection:

1. What we encounter in Chapter Sixteen in *The Insanity of God* is grief upon grief. Somehow, Nik, Ruth, their family, and their faith community chose to honor God through Tim's death. Reflect on the hope that you have as a follower of Jesus. Describe the impact of Tim's funeral service on Omar Aziz.
2. In terms of your Christian walk, what do you typically do in times of devastating loss? Do you openly express your pain and disappointment – or do you try to hide your true feelings? Do you turn toward God – or tend to walk away? What would non-believers conclude about your faith by watching you deal with loss?
3. At the conclusion of this chapter, Nik asks a troubling question about the relevance and power of Jesus' resurrection in Somali. In all that you have read so far in *The Insanity of God*, do you see any evidence in the story of good overcoming evil?

Seventeen: A New Path

Sent into the Storm

Mark 4:35-41

Many of us tend to believe that the struggles that come in life are the direct result of our wrong choices and decisions. Clearly, that is sometimes the case. And the key word in that sentence is *sometimes*. Indeed, sometimes we encounter storms of our own choosing. In some cases, our struggles grow directly out of our disobedience to God. And because that is true *sometimes*, we might suspect that it is *always* true. But God's word tells us something different.

The familiar story that we read in Mark 4:35-41 is a favorite story that highlights the power of Jesus over the forces of nature as well as his deep love for those who follow him. Jesus' disciples find themselves dealing with a furious storm while Jesus sleeps soundly in the stern of the boat. When the disciples wake Jesus and express their great fear, he calms the wind and the waves with a word. "Quiet," he says. "Be still." The sea becomes calm and the wind dies down.

Though they have already seen him do miracles, the disciples are amazed. In fact, the text tells us that they are terrified. "Who is this?" they ask one another. "Even the wind and waves obey him!"

This story is a wonderful opportunity for us to think about the storms of life. Again, our normal presumption is that storms come because we have done something wrong. It is crucial to note, however, that the disciples (in Mark 4:35-41) *are led into the storm by Jesus!* The storm that they encounter is not caused by their disobedience or by their failure or by their mistakes. In fact, they find themselves in a terrible storm *specifically because of their obedience*. Jesus says to them quite simply, "Let's go over to the other side." And the disciples obediently respond by climbing into the boat.

Evidently, some of the storms that we might face in life happen not because we are doing something wrong . . . but because we are doing something right!

As we move into the second half of *The Insanity of God*, we will begin focusing more and more on the persecution that comes to followers of Jesus. It is tempting to believe that persecution happens to followers of Jesus when they have done something wrong. It is tempting to believe that persecution is a problem to be avoided, that persecution is an unfortunate happening that is unnecessary, and that persecution could never be part of God's plan.

In light of those common thoughts, how amazing it is to find Scripture teaching us that many of the storms that come our way – including the storm of persecution – come specifically because followers of Jesus are living out their faith boldly and obediently! And how amazing it is to learn that even persecution can be used by God for his purposes!

*Lord God,
I do not care much for storms.
I would prefer simply to avoid them.
My normal presumption is that your job
is to keep storms away from me.
How strange, though, to be told
that you use storms for your purposes!
How utterly unbelievable to be told
that you sometimes send storms!
And how stunning to realize that sometimes
you send your children into storms.
Teach me to understand your ways.
Teach me that some storms may come
because I am being faithful and obedient to you.
I have much still to learn about your unusual ways.
I never imagined that you would send me into a storm.
But right there
– in the storm –
I see that even the wind and the waves obey you.
Amen*

Questions for reflection:

1. Why would God send his children into storms? How could that possibly assist in accomplishing his purposes?
2. Do you ever feel that the people who obey God should get a break on hard things? Is that popular theology a part of your upbringing? Is that popular theology present in the teaching of your church? If that theology happened to be true, what are the implications for followers of Jesus who are persecuted?

-
-
3. In Chapter Seventeen, Nik describes a remarkable community of college students that helped Nik and Ruth heal and become strong again. Do you have that kind of nurturing, encouraging community in your life? What impact would there be on your neighborhood if your church exhibited that kind of love and affirmation?

Eighteen: Seeking Answers in the USSR

The Certainty of Persecution

1 Peter 4:12-19

Written against the backdrop of persecution, 1 Peter is grounded in one of the central themes of the New Testament: *followers of Jesus will experience persecution.*

Jesus promised his followers that they would not be loved by the world. Jesus trained his followers how to react and respond to the attacks of the world. Even more than that, Jesus even suggested that there is a kind of “blessedness” that accompanies persecution. And 1 Peter is right in line with Jesus’ own teaching. 1 Peter deals with all kinds of suffering – but it focuses most clearly on the suffering that happens because of relationship with Jesus.

Evidently, 1 Peter is written to encourage believers who are surprised by their suffering. These people are followers of Jesus – and they are finding life to be unnecessarily hard. So Peter says to them, “Do not be surprised! Do not be surprised by the painful trial that you are suffering. Do not be surprised by your fiery ordeal. Do not be surprised by the attacks. Do not be surprised *as if* this is something strange or unexpected. This is part of following Jesus. It comes with the territory – and you have no reason to believe that you will be immune.”

In today’s Bible passage, several important themes about persecution emerge.

First, persecution is inevitable for followers of Jesus. We might not like to hear that, but it is precisely what Jesus says to those who follow him. And that is why Peter starts this section of 1 Peter by saying, “Do not be surprised!” To be a follower of Jesus is to face persecution.

Second, we are told here that persecution is a way to share in the very sufferings of Christ. Peter explains here that sharing in Christ’s sufferings is a matter for rejoicing. For a follower of Jesus, persecution is not a penalty, but a privilege. It is not some cosmic mistake, but an invitation to share firsthand in God’s activity.

Third, we are told here that persecution is the way to glory. We understand that there is no crown without the cross, no life without death to self, no ultimate joy without sacrifice, no resurrection without the crucifixion. In that same way, persecution opens the door to experience the very glory of God.

While we very much want to believe that all suffering – and especially the suffering related to persecution – is *contrary* to God's will, we are told plainly in this passage that there is a suffering that is *according to God's will*! When that kind of suffering comes, we are instructed to commit ourselves to our faithful Creator and to continue to do good. Even so, how startling to be told that there is a kind of suffering that is fully within the will of God and a kind of suffering that can be used for his purposes.

By definition, those who follow Jesus will live in tension with the world. Sometimes that tension will be extreme. When that happens, our prayer is that our response would be one of faithfulness. Our prayer is that we would see what is happening to us as an opportunity to give glory to God.

*God,
it is, frankly, stretching things a bit
to imagine that suffering for Jesus
is a privilege.
I am not quite ready to accept that.
I prefer, instead, to see suffering
as something to be avoided.
Yet the words of Scripture haunt me.
I am clearly invited to share in Jesus' sufferings.
I figure that, if I stay really quiet,
I might be able to avoid that.
But I also know better.
I know that when Jesus described
the suffering of his followers,
he included me.
I am not quite there yet,
but help me to see persecution as a privilege,
as an opportunity to give you glory.
I surely do not seek suffering, Lord.
But I choose to live as your person
no matter what.
Give me courage.
Amen*

Questions for reflection:

1. The believers that Nik meets in Russia seem to have such a different view of suffering and persecution than most believers in the west. Why is that so? How would growing up in an environment of persecution change the way persecution is understood?
2. Dmitri talks about getting fired from his job, his wife losing her teaching position, his boys being expelled from school – and then he calls those losses “little things.” Most of us would not call those “little things” at all. With Dmitri’s phrase in mind, though, what are some of the “little things” that you would be willing to sacrifice for your faith in Jesus? Where would you draw the line between “little things” and “big things”?
3. Nik draws a connection between the intensity of the persecution and the spiritual vitality of the believers. Can you understand why that would be true? If believers are not facing persecution, what *could* that mean about the believers? Do you personally find that possibility convicting?

Nineteen: A Prison Sings

Making the Words Our Own

Deuteronomy 17:14-20

In today's passage, we find God giving specific instructions for the kings who will one day rule Israel in the future. Among other detailed guidelines, the kings are told to write for themselves their own copy of God's law. Evidently, the kings are expected to write their own copy of God's law in their own hand. Further, they are told to read their scroll and to follow faithfully all the words that are there.

This is a remarkable instruction. We might imagine a king saying, in response, "Well, I already have a scroll. I can read it anytime I please. So why would I need to write my own copy? That would be nothing but a waste of time!" But that attitude misses the point of the instruction. The king is required to write his own scroll because, in the writing of the words in his own hand, those words become part of him. To slow down enough to write God's law means that there is a chance that the words might sink into the king's heart. There is a possibility that those words might actually affect his behavior and his character.

It is a little different, of course, but in Chapter Nineteen of *The Insanity of God* we encounter a man named Dmitri who is essentially writing his own copy of Scripture. He writes the words on tiny scraps of paper and then attaches those little scraps of paper to pillar in his cell. Significantly, Dmitri is not *copying* God's word – he is, instead, writing the words *from memory*! The words are already so deeply planted in his heart that he can simply call them to mind.

The instruction that we find in Deuteronomy 17 about the copying of the scroll might seem to us to be a little overdone. We might suggest that the king has more important things to do than copying down words that have already been written. On the other hand, what could be more important for the king than dwelling on God's word and making it his own?

Evidently, God understands that if the king actually does that, there might be a chance for the king to remain close to God and to honor his words.

*God,
my life is filled with so many important things.
I have so little time.
So you understand,
I am sure,
why I cannot devote time to your word.
Simply to read your word is a task
that requires too much effort on my part.
And to memorize parts of it?
Well, God, that just is not a priority for me.
But the story of Dmitri causes me to wonder.
Did he somehow have more time than I have?
How was he able to make the choice
to live daily in the presence of your word?
I am embarrassed to say that,
if I were in prison with Dmitri,
I would not have much to write
on my little scraps of paper.
Yes, I have many copies of the Bible on my bookshelf.
Forgive me for ignoring the treasure of your word.
Beginning this day,
cause me to be hungry for your word.
Amen*

Questions for reflection:

1. It is not a stretch to say that many of us are dangerously careless with God's word. If you found yourself in prison for sharing your faith – and you did not have a copy of the Bible – how much of the Bible could you reproduce on your own? What stories from the Bible are hidden deep in your heart?
2. Do you find Dmitri's example challenging – or convicting? Considering his example, are you motivated to devote more time to Scripture? Are you perhaps motivated even to make Scripture memory a part of your devotional practice?
3. How would your understanding – and your acceptance – of persecution change if you truly believed that persecution was “as normal for followers of Jesus as the sun coming up in the east”? How is it possible to take seriously Jesus' words about the inevitability of persecution – and still somehow to believe that persecution can be avoided?

Twenty: The Genealogy of Faith

Eyes That Can See

2 Kings 6:8-17

How often do we not see things that are right in front of our eyes?

The servant in today's story has a vision problem. When he looks at the hillside, he can see only an imposing army with horses and chariots. He can see only opposition. He can see only what he considers to be an inevitable outcome of defeat. In his limited understanding, there is no hope. "Oh, my lord, what shall we do?" the servant says to the prophet Elisha.

Elisha has a different way of seeing. In his understanding, there is no cause for fear. Even more, he tells the servant that "those who are with us are more than those who are with them" (6:16). Such words, though, are sheer foolishness to the servant. He simply cannot see what Elisha is describing.

So Elisha prays for the servant: "Oh Lord, open his eyes so that he may see" (6:17). And sure enough, when that happens – when the spiritual eyes of the servant are opened, he is able to see exactly what Elisha has described to him: the hills are full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.

Reading the stories in this part of *The Insanity of God*, we are challenged to consider the possibility that there is another reality – a deeper reality – that we often fail to see. We are encountering followers of Jesus *who talk with Jesus as if he is really present*. We are encountering followers of Jesus *who experience answered prayer moment by moment*. We are encountering followers of Jesus *who seem to experience miracles so often that they almost seem ordinary*. And we are compelled to ask: are we living in the same world?

Actually, we are. What is profoundly different, though, is the spiritual vision of these brothers and sisters in Christ. They actually believe that God is present and active. They actually take the words of Scripture to heart. They actually believe Jesus' promises. They are actually fully convinced that this entire world is simply brimming with the vital presence of the Living God.

Of course, we believe those things too.

At least we say we do. Sadly, however, we have a vision problem – and often we cannot see what is right before our eyes.

The servant looks at the hillside and he can see only an invading army. Elisha looks at the very same hillside and he sees the power of God.

Truly, we need to ask God to open our eyes.

God,
I simply do not see it.
I look around
and I see only trouble.
I see impossibility.
I see defeat.
Like the servant in the story,
I have poor spiritual vision.
Open my eyes.
Show me what is true.
Make it possible for me to see you.
I long to believe that you are present and active.
I long to take the words of Scripture to heart.
I long to believe Jesus' promises.
I long to be convinced that this entire world
is brimming with the vital presence
of the Living God!
I am so tired of having limited sight.
Open my eyes.
Amen

Questions for reflection:

1. What realities about God and his activity are you likely missing because of your limited vision? If God were truly to “open your eyes,” what would you probably see?
2. The conference described at the beginning of Chapter Twenty was partly intended to help young believers experience the larger kingdom of God – and to discover that there was a larger family of faith beyond their individual faith communities. Do you realize that what you know of God's activity in your life and in your church is only a tiny sliver of what he is doing all around the world? Would you consider gathering together with other bodies of believers

in your neighborhood or city to grasp a larger picture of what God is doing? How could you do that sort of thing on an even larger scale?

3. In one story in Chapter Twenty, a deacon is sent out on a dangerous mission in the middle of the night. How do you feel about his clear sense of the Holy Spirit's instruction when he was told that "he didn't have to come back; he only had to go"? Is that really how God calls? Are you still willing to go even if you cannot be sure that you will come back?
4. Katya was privileged to tell her story to her extended family. Surprisingly, her family members had never heard her story before. Who in your life needs to hear your story? And which friends and family members in your life have faith stories that you need to hear? How can you do a better job of telling and hearing the stories of faith that make up the life together of God's people?

Twenty-One: Learning to Live; Learning to Die

The Crucifixion of the Will

Mark 14:26-42

In today's Scripture passage, we find two intertwined stories. First, there is the story of Peter (and as verse 31 makes clear) the other disciples. Second, there is the story of Jesus. The two stories go in very different directions and the two stories reveal two very different attitudes of the heart.

In the first story, Peter and his friends boast about their commitment to Jesus. "Even if everybody else deserts you," Peter says to Jesus, "I will not!" "Even if I have to die with you," Peter says to Jesus, "I will never disown you!" We suspect that Peter fully means what he says. His words are courageous and heartfelt. Peter wants very much for his words to be true. And it is important to note that "all the others said the same" (14:31).

While we want to celebrate Peter's good intentions, we are also aware that he will not live up to his claims. In fact, in a matter of a very short time, Peter will not even be able to honor Jesus' request for Peter to stay awake and pray. In this part of the story, Peter essentially boasts about his commitment to Jesus . . . and then he promptly goes to sleep.

The other story in our passage today is very different. This second story is Jesus' story. This second story begins with startling honesty. Jesus tells his disciples that they are all going to fall away. He quotes the prophet Zechariah, making it plain that when the shepherd is struck down, the sheep will be scattered. Then, Jesus points clearly to the victory that will come after his death. Jesus assures his disciples that he will, indeed, keep his word and that he will be faithful to his promise. "After I have risen," Jesus says, "I will go ahead of you into Galilee."

Arriving in the garden, Jesus enters into a time of intense and fervent prayer, asking his disciples to pray with him. In this prayer (a prayer that can truly be called "the Lord's Prayer"), Jesus asks his Father to take this cup from him. The cup is a reference to the

cross, a biblical image for divinely-appointed suffering. “Everything is possible for you, Father,” he prays, “so take this cup from me.”

And this time of fervent prayer is followed by this most-important word: “Yet not as I will, but what you will.”

Writer Richard Foster calls this kind of prayer a prayer of relinquishment – the prayer of giving in – the prayer that releases our will into the will of the Father. We cannot help but notice that Jesus here does not receive what he asks for. Reflecting on this story, the great man of prayer Andrew Murray said: “For our sins, Jesus suffered beneath the burden of that unanswered prayer.” We also notice the complete submission of Jesus’ will to his Father.

For our part, doing the will of God is not all that difficult . . . until God’s will comes into conflict with what we want. At that point, the real struggle begins – and we quickly see how difficult it will be for us to pray what Jesus prays in the garden

Still, this is what we must pray if we are to be faithful and obedient: “Father, your will be done!” It is a prayer that sounds like loss. It is a prayer that sounds like death. It is a prayer that sounds like giving in.

But this prayer – and this prayer alone – it what gives us life. When we pray this prayer, we are saying that God can do what we cannot do. When we pray this prayer, we are saying that, even though we are uncertain about the next step, we are utterly certain of God. When we pray this prayer, we are removing our will from the conversation and placing our very lives in the hands of God.

And that total surrender is the greatest calling – the greatest privilege – we can ever experience. The tighter we cling to what we have – the tighter we cling to our plans, our intentions, our expectations, our needs, our desires – the less chance there is that we will ever experience the joy and life that God has prepared for those who trust him truly.

*Heavenly Father,
I struggle with submission.
It is simply not in my nature to submit –
even to you.
Actually, it is not in my nature to submit
especially to you!
I never know what you might ask
or expect or demand.
You seem to know
what I am least willing to give up.
And that is often the very thing you want.
So here is the truth:
I am perfectly happy to follow your will . . .*

*as long as your will lines up with what I want.
But I know full well that you will not settle for that.
And I know full that I do not really want that either.
Truly, your will captivates me.
It scares me to death,
but it captivates me at the same time.
In my heart –
in my best moments –
I want what you want.
So I relinquish my will to you.
I relinquish to you my will . . .
that already belongs to you.
I trust you with my very life.
Amen*

Questions for reflection:

1. It could be argued that the crucifixion of the will does not happen in one great act, but in tiny steps that we take day by day. What are some small steps that you can take today that will communicate clearly your willingness to seek the Father's will? What are some small steps that you can take today that will express your desire to want what God wants?
2. Nik says that, in his interviews, he often blurted out these questions: "How did you learn to live like this? How did you learn to die like that?" Do you believe that your aim as a follower of Jesus is to learn to live in a certain way – and to die in a certain way? If so, how can you begin to learn those things?
3. After one interview, Nik reflects on the courageous, costly faith that has been described. He says: "I was stunned. I had never heard that kind of thing in my church growing up. I had never encountered that in my pilgrimage. I was sure that I had never been told that a father should value his faith over his family." What are you helping others in your family and in your church understand about faithfulness, suffering, persecution, and the crucifixion of the will? Are you hiding those parts of the story?

Twenty-Two: Fear or Freedom?

Single Minded

Nehemiah 6:1-16

Nehemiah had been given a task to complete. The task had been given by God.

God had instructed Nehemiah to lead the exiles back to Jerusalem and, first, rebuild the city wall. Many people questioned the wisdom of that task. Some people said that it could not be done. Other people actually worked to keep it from happening. In fact, there was tremendous opposition to what Nehemiah was doing. As we read the story in Scripture, we probably notice first Nehemiah's absolute and relentless commitment to this work that God has placed in his hands.

As the work continues, some of those who oppose Nehemiah ask him to come down and talk. He interprets their request as an effort to do him harm – but probably the greatest harm in their request is simply to keep Nehemiah from his work. Those who oppose Nehemiah may be part of some grand conspiracy – or it could be that they simply want to be a distraction. Those who oppose Nehemiah would love to occupy his time with argument and debate. They essentially want to keep him from moving forward in his response to God's call.

Nehemiah does not even take the time to answer his opponents personally. He sends messengers with this word: "I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you?" (6:3) Four times Nehemiah's enemies call him to come down from the wall. And four times Nehemiah sends the same message: *I am doing a great work – and I cannot come down!*

What we see in Nehemiah's response is single-minded purpose. He has a passion for completing the task. He actually understands what his real job is – and he is totally committed to its completion.

His attitude is especially compelling . . . because we know how easy it is to be pulled away from our task. We know how easy it is to get drawn into other things so completely that we tend to forget what it is that we set out to do. Our responsibility as followers of

Jesus is to remember exactly what we have been called to do, to maintain our focus, and to be passionate about that central task.

In other words, we are to be single minded. *I am carrying on a great project and I cannot go down!*

We might want to dismiss Nehemiah as a fanatic. But that simply does not ring true; we are all fanatics for something! The key is making certain that we are being fanatics for the right thing.

*God,
I live my life all over the place.
If people ask me what my purpose is,
I am befuddled.
Often, I have no idea what my purpose is.
Most days, I simply want to survive.
So I hear the story of Nehemiah
with envy.
I wish that I could be sure about my purpose.
I wish that I could have a purpose that is so grand
that it would consume me.
I suspect that you smile when I say those words,
because you have given me a purpose
that is plenty grand –
a purpose that is worth my very life.
You tell me that my purpose is
to walk with you
and to love you completely
and to tell your story
and to extend your grace.
Help me to give myself so fully to that purpose
that I might be single minded,
passionate,
consumed.
Show me the purpose for which I was created.
Then empower me to embrace that purpose fully.
Amen*

Questions for reflection:

1. In light of the story about Nehemiah, we probably should first determine if we are, in fact, involved in a “great project”! Are you pouring your life into a great work? Do you know what your life purpose is? Are you investing your life in something that is so crucial, so important that, just like Nehemiah, you

cannot afford to be called away from your work? What would it be like for you to live with Nehemiah's passion and commitment? Is that what Jesus desires for you?

2. Clearly, the people who are telling Nik their stories seem single minded. First, they seem to understand what Jesus intends for them. Second, they seem utterly committed to their task. How can you model for others in your family and in your church that same kind of clarity and resolve?
3. What are some things in your life that distract you from your primary focus? What causes you to "come down from the wall"? How might you best deal with those distractions that might keep you from your ultimate purpose?

Refusing to Be Silent

Leaving Room for Joy

Malachi 4:1-2

The prophet Malachi has a complicated message to deliver. He speaks about judgment, about God's high expectations, and about the tendency of God's people to fail. Those parts of his message are hard – and those parts of his message are hard to hear. But there is another part of Malachi's message that we might easily miss – a part of his message that is hopeful and promising.

And that part of his message shows up right at the very end. The Lord himself is speaking and he says this: *But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall* (4:2).

That image of calves leaping as they are released from the stall is colorful, even arresting. Malachi here is talking about life, vitality, energy, freedom, and hopefulness. In a word, Malachi is talking about joy.

And the picture he paints in this verse is beautiful. The sun rises . . . with healing in its wings. As we read the words, we can almost feel the healing warmth of the sun's rays. Touched by the sun's warmth and healing, we are set free as if we have been released from a stall. And at least inwardly, our response is like a calf frolicking in the field.

Two other Bible pictures might help us grasp what Malachi is describing here.

First, there is an image in Psalm 18 that suggests David's vigor and energy and his whole-hearted embrace of life. Here is what the psalmist says: "With your help, God, I can crush a troop; and with my God I can leap over a wall" (Psalm 18:29). Reading those words, we can almost envision David running, approaching a stone wall, and then (without hesitation!) leaping the wall and continuing on. Maybe he is running toward Goliath, running away from Saul, pursuing God, meeting up with Jonathan, or rounding up stray sheep. The details may not matter; David's life is filled to overflowing with

movement. He always seems to be going somewhere. And filled with life, David exults: “With my God I can leap over a wall!”

The second picture is found in Paul’s letter to the Philippians. Granted, Paul does not use any “leaping” images here, but he paints a picture of a life of immense joy – and then he provides us with some clues about how that life of joy is possible.

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:4-7).

Malachi’s picture of calves leaping as they are released from the stall is a joyful image. And in this word to the Philippians, Paul anchors joy to the way we approach life day by day. He mentions gentleness. He talks about a refusal to be anxious. Paul highlights a relentless reliance on prayer. He calls for the giving of thanks. He talks about the peace of God. Essentially, Paul is describing the things that make joy possible.

Even in the struggle of life, this image of calves leaping from their restrictive stalls reminds us that joy, too, can be part of the story.

Perhaps we should make room for joy.

God of Joy,
forgive me for making life so hard.
Even as I struggle,
give me a glimpse of the life you offer me.
Teach me the way of hope and freedom,
the way of vitality and joy.
Draw me close so that I might be like you.
Even if I do not literally leap like a calf
or hurdle stone walls,
help me to be a person of great joy.
Remind me that my joyful heart
may actually bring joy to others.
So help me to be careful about the way I live.
Even in this broken world –
especially in this broken world –
I rejoice in you!
Amen

Questions for reflection:

1. Chapter Twenty-Three of *The Insanity of God* highlights the stories of Stoyan. In the context of his stories, we are perhaps surprised to read this: “Despite decades of extreme hardship, Stoyan’s stories were joyful and hopeful.” How can that be? As you reflect on Stoyan’s stories, can you identify some reasons for his relentless joy and hope?
2. Are you a person of joy? What can you do today to make your life more joyful? What kind of an impact will your increased joy have on others?
3. Once again, the idea surfaces in this chapter that “persecution is normal.” At this point, are you willing to accept that truth? What exactly does that mean for you as you live out your faith?
4. At the end of Chapter Twenty-Three, Nik asks a crucial question: *What if the resurrection power available to Jesus’ followers in the New Testament is just as real for believers in our world today?* Do you personally believe that it is? And if it is, why does that matter? How would that power change things for you?

Twenty-Four: Secret Rendezvous

An Audience of One

Mark 1:35-39 and Mark 3:20

These two scenes that show up early in Mark's gospel offer a startling contrast.

In Mark 1:35, we find Jesus spending time with his Father. It is so early in the morning that it is still dark, but Jesus slips away to a solitary place to pray. As we read the gospels, we see Jesus doing this often. And the immediate result of his solitary times with the Father is a deep sense of clarity and calm. That clarity is what allows Jesus to make life choices with confidence. In the verses that follow Mark 1:35, Jesus is told by Simon and his companions that everyone is looking for him. Despite the needs of *those people*, however, Jesus turns away and goes to another place. The clear implication is that time with his Father has provided Jesus with guidance and direction.

In Mark 3:20, we encounter a very different scene. It is a scene of busyness. It is a scene marked by demands and expectations. People are clamoring for Jesus' attention. In fact, the situation is so chaotic and hectic that Jesus and his disciples do not even time to eat.

These two contrasting scenes bring to the forefront one of the great challenges that Jesus faced in his ministry. Exactly who would Jesus please? Whose expectations would he fulfill? Whose demands would get his attention? Who would be his audience? Interestingly, Jesus was attentive to the needs around him. He did care. He gave himself completely to his ministry of compassion. Even so, he decided time and time again that his highest priority – in a sense, his only priority – was his relationship with his Father. The Father's expectations were the only expectations that mattered. The Father's demands occupied Jesus' heart and mind. The Father was his only audience.

Repeatedly, we find Jesus stepping aside, taking time, praying, going off by himself, spending time with his Father – rather than being captive to the demands and expectations of the people who filled his world.

The challenge that Jesus faced is our challenge as well. Every moment of every day, we answer the same questions that Jesus answered. Exactly who will we please? Whose expectations will we fulfill? Whose demands will get our attention? Who will be our audience?

We would be wise, of course, to follow Jesus' example. If we are attentive, we will see clearly that our relationship with the Father matters supremely.

In the simplest terms, we have an audience of One. God's opinion is the only one that matters.

*God,
I want to believe
that I can please you
and that I can please everyone else
at the same time.
I realize how silly that sounds,
yet that is where I normally live.
And because the demands of people
are often louder than your voice,
I tend to please people
at the expense of pleasing you.
Forgive me.
You matter supremely.
What you want holds sway over me.
What you think matters.
Still, I struggle to live in the light
of that simple truth.
So set me free to please you.
Set me free to care only about what you desire.
Deliver me from my need
to be honored and appreciated
and understood by others.
God, this is going to be hard for me –
but it is my desire to please only you.
Amen*

Questions for reflection:

1. As we encounter more and more testimonies in *The Insanity of God*, we encounter followers of Jesus who seem to have a settled commitment to obey God no matter what the cost. How do you think these individuals came to that conclusion? Is this a conclusion that you have reached? Name the things in

your life that tend to draw you away from obedience to God? In other words, what (or who) are some of your other “audiences”?

2. Near the end of Chapter Twenty-Four, Nik comments on the cost of simply saying, “Jesus is Lord” in an authoritarian nation such as China. What does it mean *practically* for you to say, “Jesus is Lord”? Will you likely experience any cost for making that proclamation? Do your friends, neighbors, and family members know that Jesus is your Lord?
3. In situations where believers are put in prison, their family members are often cared for by the body of Christ. According to the interviews, this care is rarely planned or organized – it simply happens. Are you attentive to the needs of people within your church family? Do people in your faith community take care of one another? What would happen in your church if a family lost a family member to imprisonment for the sake of Christ? How would the church respond?

Twenty-Five: One Extra Pair of Underwear

The Activity of God

Habakkuk 1:1-5 and 2 Corinthians 4:16-17

Though very different in context and setting, these two passages draw our attention to the activity of God in situations where the activity of God might be the last things we notice!

The beginning verses of Habakkuk introduce a dialogue between the prophet and God. Surprisingly, the prophet Habakkuk is rather aggressive as he questions God: “How long, Lord, do I have to keep asking for help – and have you not listen? When are you going to do something? How long am I going to have to wait?” Rather patiently, God says, “Open your eyes!” God says, “Look at what is already happening. Look at what I am already doing.” And then God says this: “If I told you what I was about to do, you simply would not believe it. But open your eyes and look. See for yourself!”

In 2 Corinthians 4:16-17, Paul is reflecting on the hardships of his life. And those hardships are real and significant. Even in the face of those hardships, though, Paul says that he will never lose heart. Perhaps with a smile, he points out that the troubles of life that he has experienced are “light and momentary.” Instead of focusing on those troubles, Paul is looking at God and focusing on what God can do in and through those troubles. Somehow, Paul is learning to see the activity of God even in his troubles.

At the most basic level, these two passages remind us again of how important it is for us to put our focus in the right place. This is a theme that has already surfaced in a number of the devotional entries in this book. We have a choice. We can put our focus on what is happening right in front of our eyes (the seen, the temporal, the troubles) – or we can look at what God is doing (the unseen, the eternal, God’s glory). Even beyond that important truth, however, there is another lesson in these passages.

In both of these very different parts of Scripture, God teaches us that he can use anything for his purposes. He can use people and events and situations that we would dismiss as “unusable.”

In the case of Habakkuk, God will use the Babylonians to accomplish his purposes. If we read beyond our text for today, we will see quickly (beginning in Habakkuk 1:6) that God will raise up the Babylonians. When God tells the prophet that he is going to do something in his days that he will not believe, God is talking about using the Babylonians to accomplish his plan. As God makes clear, Habakkuk will indeed be amazed! He is not merely amazed that God will finally act, but even more amazed (and maybe horrified) that God will use the hated Babylonians in his plan.

In the case of Paul, God will use all those so-called “light and momentary” troubles to accomplish his will. As we read the story of Paul’s life, “light and momentary” is the last description we would use for Paul’s troubles. In fact, we might be more inclined to call Paul’s troubles “deadly and cataclysmic”! Whatever we call the troubles, however, Paul’s point is that those troubles are being used by God for a higher purpose.

So in Chapter Twenty-Five of *The Insanity of God*, we read about hideous suffering that followers of Jesus in China endured. These men had some “light and momentary” troubles of their own. If we read their testimonies carefully, though, we sense an unusual focus. We notice that they are talking not about their troubles – but about the power of God to work in the midst of impossible pain and suffering.

Just like Habakkuk, we are amazed at God’s choices. God can use the Babylonians for his purposes. God can use “light and momentary” troubles. He can also use “deadly and cataclysmic” troubles.

And he can use imprisonment and persecution and torture and suffering and pain for his purposes too.

*God,
I am a lot like Habakkuk
in the very beginning of the story.
I want to know when exactly you are going to show up.
I want to know when exactly
you are going to put a stop to the suffering.
But then you tell me that you are already at work.
You tell me that you have already shown up.
And I am confused.
I was waiting for the troubles to stop
so that you would, then, be able to start working.
But you tell me that you were working all along –
even while the troubles continued.
Lord God,*

*you amaze me.
I would do things so differently.
Personally, I would get rid of all the bad things –
and then I would start my work.
Instead, you simply use the bad things
to accomplish whatever you desire.
Lord God,
you amaze me.
Teach me how to look at my life –
and especially my troubles –
in a different light.
And when I see you using the Babylonians
for your purposes,
give me the grace simply to say,
“Isn’t that just like God”?
Amen*

Questions for reflection:

1. We know that God can use all manner of troubles for his purposes. With that truth in mind, reflect on the experiences of the followers of Jesus chronicled in Chapter Twenty-Five. How exactly did God use imprisonment and persecution in their lives? What was the outcome of their suffering? Had these men not been open to the activity of God, what might the outcome have been?
2. Do you have any “light and momentary” troubles in your life that are delaying or inhibiting your spiritual growth? Are you waiting for some troubles to be removed or resolved so that you can then give more attention and energy to walking with Jesus? If you happen to be in that waiting mode, what would God say to you?
3. Can you think of some unlikely people or events or situations that God has used in your life to accomplish his purposes? Why do you consider them “unlikely”? And how was God able to use them? Do you consider God’s choice to use you an unlikely choice?

Not Fearless, but Faithful

Luke 1:5-25, 39-45, and 57-80

Zechariah and Elizabeth exhibit remarkable faithfulness. At the same time, it seems clear from the text that they struggle with fear. At one point in the story, for example, Zechariah is said to be “gripped with fear” (1:12). Other translations of Scripture say that he is “overwhelmed with fear” or even “paralyzed with fear.” The King James Version of the Bible says that Zechariah is “troubled” and that he “falls into fear.”

Both Zechariah and Elizabeth have plenty of good reasons to be fearful. Interestingly, God does not demand that they be fearless – or even that they overcome their fear. Instead, God invites Zechariah and Elizabeth to be faithful – despite their fear.

It turns out that God is not looking for fearless people. Instead, God is looking for people who, despite their fear, will still choose to be faithful. God typically does not use fearless people (because there are not really any of those!) – but he loves to use people who are willing to be faithful even when they are afraid.

The life of Zechariah and Elizabeth is made up of several distinct movements – but each movement highlights their desire to be faithful to God’s call.

First, there is a season of disappointment and grief and confusion (1:5-7). Zechariah and Elizabeth are troubled by the fact that they have no children. Still, they resolve to be faithful.

Second, when they are invited to have hope, there is doubt and fear and uncertainty (1:8-25). Given the promise of a son, Zechariah struggles to believe. Despite his inability to believe, Zechariah remains faithful.

Third, when both Zechariah and Elizabeth are ultimately overwhelmed by God’s grace, they respond with worship and praise and gratitude (1:57-66). And in this joyous season of celebration, they are, once again, faithful.

Faithfulness, in fact, is the theme of their lives. And their faithfulness is not dependent on their circumstances – good or bad.

Their example is a good one. Often we live with the hopeful thought that we will finally begin to live out our faith . . . once we overcome our fear. We resolve to share our faith with our neighbor . . . once we are no longer afraid. We fully intend to invite a friend to worship . . . as soon as we are not quite so fearful.

And it is likely that many other possibilities can be put on that list. We will become part of a mission team . . . or help with a ministry . . . or teach a class . . . or share our testimony in public . . . or work with the youth . . . or really “go deep” in our relationship with Jesus – once we overcome our fear.

That day will likely never come. That day never came for Zechariah and Elizabeth. And that day never came for the followers of Jesus that we read about in Chapter Twenty-Five of *The Insanity of God*. They did not decide to honor their commitment once they became fearless. Instead, they chose to be faithful despite their fear.

And in that good choice, they were profoundly blessed – and used – by God.

God,
I cannot wait to become the follower of Jesus
that I want to be –
but there a few things that need to happen first.
Most importantly, I need to deal with my fear.
And I am working on that.
It terrifies me to think about
giving you complete control of my life –
so I am working hard to get more comfortable
with that idea.
In the meantime,
I realize that I am missing a lot of opportunities.
In my most honest moments,
I fear that I am waiting for something that will never come.
I know that I am simply using my fear as an excuse.
And all those missed opportunities grieve me.
So I am wondering if, maybe,
you would actually want me to be faithful today –
even though I am very afraid.
In fact, I am sure of it.
I know that you want my faithfulness today.
So despite my fear,
help me to be faithful.
Amen

Questions for reflection:

1. How is it possible for believers in settings of severe persecution to choose faithfulness to God – even knowing that their faithfulness will almost certainly mean imprisonment, torture, and perhaps even death? What would cause someone to choose costly faithfulness over a more comfortable faithlessness?
2. Do you believe that there would be any significant cost related to your radical faithfulness to God's call? What might that cost be? Are you personally willing to bear that cost?
3. Believers in settings of persecution are often afraid. Despite their fear, how are they able to continue to walk in faith?
4. What fears keep you from living out your faith? Which of those fears are justified and which ones are probably not real? Are you willing to move forward in your walk despite your fears?

Chapter Twenty-Six: The Power of Prison

How God Uses Trials

James 1:2-18

Imagine some followers of Jesus in those first few generations. They had responded to the call of Christ. They had heard the good news and they had eagerly followed. They had acted on their desire to live as the people of God, and together (with other believers) they were becoming a community of worship and service and mission. We might call these believers “the early church,” but they did not call themselves that. They only knew that God had called them into relationship – and they discovered that relationship with God is what they had been craving. They knew that *this* is what they were created for. And now they had found it – or, better, it had found them!

Perhaps it came as a surprise to these believers, but their new life together as God’s people was not even close to perfect. Hard times continued to come. In fact, hard times seemed even more frequent now since they had become believers. When they thought back on how the good news had been presented to them, they had to admit that no one had promised them that everything would be wonderful or perfect if they decided to follow Jesus. Still, some of them had bought into the idea anyway. But a perfect life did not come. Some of these believers lost their jobs. Some did not have enough food to eat. Some had family problems that seemed to get worse and worse. There was physical pain and sickness. Discouragement. Disappointment. Some of these believers were even put in prison.

Of course, there were plenty of good things too. But a surprising number of trials. And perhaps some of them wondered: “What is happening here? Doesn’t God love us? Doesn’t God care? And if he does care, why does he allow all these trials to come our way? We are being faithful. We are trying to be sincere in our worship. We are praying. We are sharing our faith. But the trials still come.”

Sometimes, we might wonder some of the very same things.

And it is the first chapter of James that will help us with our struggle. James tells us that the trials and struggles are not meaningless. James tells us that the trials and struggles – even the temptations – serve some larger purpose. James tells us that God’s agenda is

being advanced by the very things that we often consider to be “bad.” And James also tells us all these trials and struggles are not beyond God’s control.

If we work through today’s reading section by section, this is what we see:

1. God uses trials and temptations to bring us to maturity (1:2-4).
2. God uses trials and temptations to call us to prayer – and that commitment to prayer results in wisdom (1:5-8).
3. God uses trials and temptations to help us see life from his point of view. In these verses, James reminds us that God does not see the world (including wealth and poverty) the same way we normally do (1:9-11).
4. God uses trials and temptations to remind us that he can use even those things for his purposes. Even though temptation is not from God, he can use even that for his purposes. This should remind us of God’s power (1:12-16).
5. Finally, God uses trials and temptations to teach us how to enjoy his good gifts (1:17-18).

And the result of all of that – the result of the plot twists and the struggles and the dark nights – is that, according to James, we gradually become the people God has created us to be. Ultimately, James is talking here about the hard, slow work of building character. James is challenging us to be open to the kind of character God wants to produce in us: maturity, wisdom, faith, seeing things with God’s eyes, joy, trust.

Why would God give us money or safety or calm – when he could, instead, give us character? Why would God give us a quiet life – when he could, instead, make us his people?

James would have us understand that God knows exactly what he is doing. And James would have us understand that trials and temptations are often God’s tools of choice.

And even though this might take a long time – and even though this might involve some pain – God will not settle for anything less.

That is why James tells us plainly to consider it pure joy whenever we face trials of many kinds – because that means that God is at work and that he is having his way!

*God,
I sometimes read the first chapter of James –
and I assume that it must be a misprint.
That you would expect me to use the word “joy”
to define my trials is simply too much.*

*Frankly, I despise trials.
I try to avoid trials.
Yet these words encourage me to accept trials
as gifts from you.
I wish there were an easier way for you
to make me the person that I need to be.
But you tell me that trials are an essential part
of your character-building work.
I confess that I do not always want what you want –
even for myself.
But God, I want to want what you want!
And because that is true,
I invite you to do whatever it takes
to make me the person you want me to be.
Use whatever is necessary –
use even trials –
to make me the person you want me to be.
Amen*

Questions for reflection:

1. In Chapter Twenty-Six, we encounter Chinese believers who consider prison their setting for theological training. They were so convinced that time in prison resulted in maturity and stronger faith that they were hesitant to fully trust leaders who had not yet been to prison for their faith. Would you be willing to endure suffering if you were certain that your suffering was essential for your Christian maturity? Or would you choose to avoid the suffering and endure Christian immaturity instead?
2. Near the end of the chapter, Nik posed a series of questions for the group. He asked: “If I were to visit your home communities and talk with the nonbelieving families, friends, and neighbors of the members of your house churches – and if I could point out your church members and ask, ‘Who are those people? What can you tell me about them?’ – what answer would I get?” That is a good question. Answer it for yourself and for your church. If your nonbelieving family members, friends, and neighbors were asked to describe you and your church, what would they say? Would their response to the question be convicting or encouraging?
3. The believers in China were utterly convinced that God does miracles. According to their testimonies, they had seen miracles and they had participated in miracles. Do you believe that God still does miracles today? Why or why not?

Twenty-Seven: The Chinese Road Trip

Powerful and Effective Prayer

Luke 11:1-13

Prayer is one of the distinctive habits of the people of God. Jesus himself modeled an intense personal commitment to prayer – and he instructed his followers to copy his example. Jesus not only told his disciples to pray; he taught them exactly how to do that. But Jesus' emphasis on prayer was not especially unique. Prayer is a central part of the story of God's people from the beginning. For people of faith, prayer was never a minor habit simply tacked onto their lives – prayer was their life!

Jesus is not about only example. According to the Psalms, David was often willing to sacrifice sleep so that he might pray. "Early will I seek thee!" David declares in Psalm 63:1. When the disciples struggled with decisions about their ministries and about the wellbeing of the Body, they gave themselves to prayer (Acts 6:4, for example). The Reformer Martin Luther expressed his attitude toward prayer this way: "I have so much business, that I cannot get on without spending three hours daily in prayer." For Luther, his prayer times often came in the wee hours of the morning. John Wesley claimed that God would do nothing *except* in answer to prayer. John Wesley backed up that claim by devoting two hours a day to prayer.

It is likely true that every follower of Jesus needs to grow in his or her understanding of prayer. It is likely true that every follower of Jesus needs to grow in his or her commitment to prayer. And as that happens, we will find ourselves being changed. It will be impossible for us to spend time with God and not be changed. In our praying, we will become different. In our praying, we will come to understand God differently. In our praying, we will find ourselves getting in step with him

We tend to have many, many excuses for our lack of commitment to prayer. We believe, for example, that we are too busy. Or that we do not know how to pray. Or that prayer is something best left to the professionals (whoever they are).

But really, the only reason we do not pray is because we do not believe we need to.

Jesus tells us clearly, though, that his followers cannot survive without prayer. Once we are convinced of that, we will not be able to help ourselves. Once we realize how desperately we need to pray, we will pray.

*God,
once again, I have my reasons.
This time it is my reasons for not praying.
I am, of course, too busy.
I have never really learned how to pray.
Truthfully, I do not pray often
because I am not really convinced that I need to.
I even figure that you have already made a plan
and that my prayers will not make a difference.
But you assure that my prayers will make a difference –
especially to me.
In prayer, you tell me,
you are mostly trying to change me.
In prayer, you tell me,
you are trying to shape my heart.
And maybe that is why I avoid prayer –
because I am not always eager
for you to shape my heart!
Again, God, forgive me.
Forgive me for thinking that I can make my own way
and figure out my own path.
Teach me submission.
If you say that I need to pray,
then I need to pray.
So help me to do just that.
Help me to grow in my commitment to prayer.
Amen*

Questions for reflection:

1. At the end of Chapter Twenty-Seven, we read about a spontaneous prayer meeting that breaks out after the Chinese followers of Jesus hear about their persecuted brothers and sisters in Christ around the world. After learning about *your* persecuted brothers and sisters in Christ around the world, how – *and how much* – will you pray for them?
2. How important is intercessory prayer in the life of your church? Are you willing to make a commitment to make prayer a priority in your life and in your church?

Twenty-Eight: Preparing for Persecution

An Additional Fifteen Years

Isaiah 38:1-22

In the previous devotional, we talked about how prayer changes us. Many Bible teachers, in fact, emphasize that the *primary* purpose of prayer is specifically to align our hearts with God's heart. And surely that happens when we pray.

Something else happens as well.

Isaiah 38:1-22 is a classic example of fervent prayer that makes a difference with God. Hezekiah is sick unto death – and he is even told by the prophet Isaiah that he is about to die. “Put your house in order,” Hezekiah is told, “because you are going to die; you will not recover” (38:1).

Yet after his fervent prayer and his bitter weeping, God grants Hezekiah an additional fifteen years of life. God confirms that gift of the added years by causing the shadow of the sun to go backwards (38:7-8).

Working with this story, it would be easy to focus on the impact of sincere and heartfelt prayer – or even to focus on the miracle of the additional fifteen years. It would be easy to focus on God's power to heal Hezekiah – or on God's power to make shadows do what they do not normally do. And those are all central parts of this remarkable story.

But there is also this: *how would we live if we knew exactly how many years we had left? If God were to say to us today (as he did to Hezekiah), “You have fifteen years left,” how would that awareness affect our living?*

Or would it?

It is fascinating to speculate about Hezekiah and this marvelous gift that he has been given. We have only a few additional stories about Hezekiah, so we are free to wonder about what he did with his gift.

In those first few days and weeks, Hezekiah was likely overwhelmed with God's grace. At that point, he probably promised both God and himself that he would use his extra years well. People who go through crisis often talk about "a second chance" or even "a new lease on life." So that is probably where Hezekiah started.

Then, perhaps, the gift grew a little dim as time passed. It probably became easy to forget the original crisis – and it maybe became easy even to forget the gift. Fifteen years is a long time. It is likely that some new crises came up. Life went on. And we can probably understand why Hezekiah would lose some of his earlier resolve.

Eventually, Hezekiah probably began to wonder if God really would keep to his "fifteen-year pronouncement." If Hezekiah was like most people, he lived as if he would live forever – despite this definite word that he had received from God. So maybe Hezekiah was not actually watching the calendar as he approached the end of his additional fifteen years.

Sadly – and maybe predictably – the next chapter of Isaiah paints a picture of a rather self-centered Hezekiah. Normally, we might assume that people will be dramatically changed by the big lessons that come their way, but sometimes even these big lessons do not have much of a lasting impact.

Most of us have not received a clear word from God about the remaining years of our lives. But whatever that number might be, the time that God will give us to serve him here on this earth is limited. Knowing that, how exactly will we live? How will we live today? How will we use this gift of time that we have been given?

This story that we encounter in Isaiah 38 is a great story. Passionate and sincere prayer is answered. God does a miracle and extra years are added to a life. Even heavenly bodies are changed as a sign.

But behind all of that is this simple question: *what will Hezekiah do with the years that have been given to him?*

And then this question: *what will we do with ours?*

Lord,
I know better,
but I live as if I will live here on this earth forever.
There are so many things
that I will get to *one day*.
There are so many changes
that I will make *one day*.

In fact, I fully plan to get much more serious about my spiritual life

one day.
I plan to be bolder in my witness
one day.
I plan to make the Great Commission my commission
one day.
But not today.
I will do those important things later.
Other important things occupy my heart right now.
Once again, forgive me, Lord.
Forgive me for the sin of presumption –
for assuming that I will have plenty of time later.
Forgive me for filling my life with lesser things.
Forgive me for not seeing today
as the precious, priceless
gift that it is.
Lord, what would you have me do today?
Lord, how would you have me live today?
Lord, help me not to waste your gift of today.
Amen

Questions for reflection:

1. After several private interviews with Chinese believers, Nik is told by the leaders that the interviews in the future will be public, in front of the entire group. That change leads to a remarkable time of sharing testimonies and stories of faith. Are there opportunities in your faith community for the sharing of testimonies and stories of faith? How would it affect your church for those stories to be shared openly and often? Have you heard the testimonies of your fellow church members? Have they heard yours? How does it help you to hear the faith stories of others?
2. Nik was shocked to see the Chinese believers tearing the Bible into pieces. He was told that they were tearing the Bible into pieces so that each person might take a part of the Bible home. Are you grateful for the access you have to the Bible? How will you respond to the privilege of having free and easy access to Scripture?

Twenty-Nine: Rebuked by God

Why God Does What He Does

Joshua 4:20-24

The river rocks that had been taken from the Jordan River continued to be a sign and symbol for God's people. In today's passage, the crossing of the Jordan River is explicitly tied to the crossing of the Red Sea. These parallel events highlight God's power and his ability to provide for his people.

In general, we are quite certain that God has a purpose. Even as he fulfills that purpose, though, we might wonder exactly why God does what he does.

That is actually a great question – and we find the answer to that great question in Joshua 4:24. Why did God dry up the Red Sea and rescue his people by allowing them to cross over on dry land? Why did God stop the flow of the Jordan River and deliver his people safely in the Land of Promise? And why does God continue to act in the same way today? Why does God call out a people and care for them and send them out on mission? Why does God do what he does?

According to Joshua 4:24, there are two answers to that question.

First, God does what he does *so that all the peoples of the earth might know that the hand of the Lord is powerful*. The hand of the Lord is powerful. And though God's people surely know this, it is quite possible that the peoples of the earth do not know this. It is God's desire that all the peoples of the earth might know of his power. He demonstrates his power in the act of creation and he demonstrates his power in the act of redemption. God can call the world into being out of nothing – and then he can redeem what he has created. And God intends for the whole world to know of his power.

Second, God does what he does *so that we might always fear the Lord our God*. To fear God means to hold him in awesome reverence. To fear God means to live before him with obedience and worship and service. To fear God describes a proper and appropriate posture of respect and adoration. To fear God is to recognize his divine holiness – and to fall before that holiness in awe. And

according to Joshua 4:24, God does what he does so that we might be overwhelmed in his presence and come to know him in that way.

Those two stories of the crossing of Red Sea and the Jordan River were, for the people of God, community-making and community-shaping events. Those two events stood as holy symbols for generations of God's people, reminding them of God's ability to accomplish his plans and fulfill his purpose. Hopefully, those stories are our stories as well. Beyond those specific stories, we have other stories that remind us of God's ongoing activity in the lives of his people. We are changed as God works and moves among us.

But why, exactly, does he do what he does?

Quite simply, God does what he does so that all the peoples of the earth might know that the hand of the Lord is powerful.

And God does what he does so that we might always fear the Lord our God.

God is powerful enough to create. And God is powerful enough to redeem what he has created. Before that kind of majesty and holiness and grace – we are overwhelmed. And we worship him. We honor him. We receive his gift of grace.

And we live as his friends. Unbelievably, we live as his friends.

Lord God,
I am undone in your presence.
To imagine that the Creator of all things
desires a relationship with me
is beyond my comprehension.
All I can do is bow before you –
overwhelmed by your grace.
In the same moment,
it dawns on me that I have the high privilege
of helping others experience this same grace.
Help me not to be selfish with your priceless gift.
Help me to share and tell and go,
so that others might know of your power.
I pray that my life today
might be an honest and true
expression of my love for you,
May everything I do
and everything I say
be an act of worship –

for you are worthy.
You alone are worthy.
Amen

Questions for reflection:

1. In Chapter Twenty-Nine, the theme of joy surfaces once again. How are the Chinese believers able to maintain a spirit of joyfulness even in settings of severe persecution? How can you cultivate a spirit of joy?
2. Nik thinks back to the students that he had met in Beijing. He says that they did not merely accept the potential cost of their commitment to Christ, but that they “embraced what they considered the adventure of following Jesus.” First, do you consider following Jesus “an adventure”? Second, are you willing (and eager?) to “embrace” that adventure? How would embracing an adventure be different than merely accepting it – or even tolerating it?

Thirty: Dreams and Visions

Our Plans – Or His?

Jeremiah 42:1-22

The prophet Jeremiah is often known as the weeping prophet. He carries his emotions on his sleeve. He feels deeply all that happens to God's people. For some reason, Jeremiah seems destined to deliver hard words, and he takes no pleasure in the difficult judgments of God. Even the people who disagree with Jeremiah (and most people do) see his integrity and honesty. These people – even the ones who disagree with him – repeatedly ask Jeremiah for a word from God. They are always hoping that the word from God will line up with what they already desire.

In Jeremiah 42, the leaders of the people approach Jeremiah and ask once again for a word from God. Jerusalem has already fallen and the leaders want to know what they should do next. Their request of Jeremiah for a word from God seems genuine. It *seems* genuine . . .

Pray that the Lord your God will tell us where we should go and what we should do (42:3).

May the Lord be a true and faithful witness against us if we do not act in accordance with everything the Lord your God sends you to tell us. Whether it is favorable or unfavorable, we will obey the Lord our God, to whom we are sending you, so that it will go well with us, for we will obey the Lord our God (42:5-6).

Like God's people in Jeremiah's day, we desperately want to hear a word from the Lord. We want to hear a word from the Lord, that is, as long as he says what we want him to say! We love the counsel of other people . . . as long as their counsel supports our conclusions and desires! We like the concept of obedience . . . as long as obedience means that we get to do what we want!

In responding to the request of the leaders, Jeremiah gives them a word from the Lord. He tells the people that they should not go to Egypt. Even further, Jeremiah tells them

that they “made a fatal mistake when you sent me to the Lord your God and said, ‘Pray to the Lord our God for us; tell us everything he says and we will do it’” (42:19-20).

Despite the seemingly sincere request for a word from the Lord in Jeremiah 42, it turns out that the people have already decided on a course of action. They have already decided to go to Egypt (hoping that they will be able to survive there). Frankly, that kind of move makes sense. The Babylonians are already in Jerusalem – but the Babylonians are not in Egypt. So it makes sense to go where the Babylonians are not! Having already decided on a course of action, the leaders go to the prophet to get confirmation from the Lord. Their actual prayer is something like this: “God, bless our plans!” Even more, they make the bold claim that they will do *whatever* the Lord tells them to do.

They wait ten days (42:7) for Jeremiah’s answer to their request. Ten days is a long time to wait for an answer. Imagine what those ten days were like. During those ten days, the people continue to make their plans, they pack, and they dream about their future in Egypt. They *are certain* of what the Lord will say. Of course, the Lord will agree with them and bless their plans!

Except . . . he doesn’t do that at all.

At that point, it is almost impossible to change course. And we are not surprised at all to read these words early in the next chapter of Jeremiah: *So they entered Egypt in disobedience to the Lord (43:7).*

Sometimes it is not too difficult to find a personal application in our study of God’s word. How often do we settle on a plan and then ask God to tell us that our plan is okay with him? How often do we presume that God will approve our plan because it makes sense? How often do we refuse to stop or change directions because we are already invested in a particular path?

Thankfully, God is gracious even then. Amazingly, even if we disobediently travel to Egypt, he will find a way to redeem our foolishness.

But what needless pain we suffer.

Instead of asking God to bless our plans, we should simply ask that he give us his plan.

*God,
sometimes it is hard for me to wait for your direction.
Instead of waiting,
I am inclined to come up with my own plan.
And I do, in fact, pray about it.
But what I often pray is that you would
bless what it is that I have already come up with.
More to the point,*

*it is pretty easy to be certain that you will bless something
that I am already committed to –
mostly because it is really hard for me
to change direction at that point.
I realize, of course, how wrong this approach is.
But it is really going to be hard for me
to wait for you to speak.
And it will be even harder for me simply
to do what you tell me to do.
Even so, help me not to pretend to want your guidance –
when what I really want is your affirmation of my plan.
My plans are sorry substitutes for your will.
And what I want –
what I truly want –
is your will.
Amen*

Questions for reflection:

1. The story of Pramana is simply breathtaking! Do you believe that God can lead people in such clear and dramatic ways? Do you believe that God can lead you that way? What do you sense God leading you to do right now?
2. One of themes that surfaces in interviews in *The Insanity of God* is the theme of freedom. Even in settings of severe persecution, believers are free to share their faith and they are free to live out the gospel. There might, of course, be a harsh penalty for their faithfulness, but these believers have come to realize that they are free – in any setting – to follow Jesus. Do you feel that same freedom? Even if you were to be threatened with imprisonment for sharing your faith, do you realize that you are still free to share your faith? In your life, what tends to inhibit that freedom that Christ has given you to live as his person?
3. Near the end of Chapter Thirty, there are two stories that emphasize intimate relationship with the Lord. In the first story, Nik comments to a believer that he had not been paying attention and that he had not heard what the man had said. In response, the man answered, “That’s all right, Nik, I realized that. But I wasn’t talking to you. I was talking with the Lord to see where we were, and what we should do today.” In the second story, Nik and his colleagues arrive at an apartment only to hear the resident there say, “The Holy Spirit told me that you were coming this morning.” As Nik and his colleagues enter the apartment, they find the breakfast table already set for them. Do you have that kind of intimate relationship with the Lord? If so, how do you maintain

and enhance that relationship? If not, how can you develop that kind of relationship? Is that something you want?

Thirty-One: The Toughest Man I Ever Met

The Man on the Cross

Philippians 2:1-11

Philippians 2:1-11 is a powerful and beautiful expression of the work of Christ. The word “incarnation” means “taking on human form” and that is exactly what Christ did on our behalf. Philippians 2 celebrates and explains that great work of Christ. Christ took on human form. The apostle John expresses the same truth this way: *The Word (Christ) became flesh and dwelt among us* (John 1:14).

Many people believe that what we find Philippians 2 is a hymn from the early church. That could well be true – in fact, it is not hard to imagine *singing* the words we read here. Even today, these words speak to the deepest places of our heart.

This passage from Philippians helps us put into words what we believe about Christ. The first great truth we notice here is that Christ existed before Bethlehem. Again, the apostle John makes that truth even clearer: *In the beginning was the Word (Christ), and the Word was with God, and the Word was God* (John 1:1). Sometimes, this truth is referred to as the pre-existence of Christ. Christ existed before Bethlehem. In fact, he has always existed. Christ is eternal.

As we read further, though, we learn about an amazing choice that Christ made. At a certain point, as an act of obedience, Christ chose to make himself nothing. He emptied himself. He let go (for a time) of what was rightfully his. He took on the very nature of a servant, and he chose to be born as a human being.

Even more, he humbled himself and he walked to the cross. Again, this was an act of love and obedience. In doing that, Christ revealed the reason for his coming. It may sound jarring, but Jesus came to die. Jesus was born to die for you and for me. He was obedient in his willingness to take on human form – and he was obedient in his willingness to go to the cross. That cross is the very purpose for his coming.

Philippians 2:1-11 certainly describes the glorious work of Christ, but there is a broader context as well. This passage celebrates Christ and his obedience, but verses 1 through 5

cause us to think about our obedience too. In this passage that celebrates Christ, we are challenged to think about our attitudes, our behaviors, our hearts. Rather pointedly, the apostle Paul says here that our attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus! We are called clearly to model our Lord who emptied himself, humbled himself, and gave up what was his. And Paul says, “That is how it should be with you!” Paul says, “This is what the church should look like!”

We follow a Lord who lays down his life. And under his Lordship, we are to do that too!

In one of his books, A.W. Tozer described someone who is on a cross. He noted three things that would be true about that person.

First, he said, that person on a cross would be facing only one direction.

Second, he said, that person could never turn back.

And third, he said, that person would no longer have any plans of his own.

And while that certainly describes Jesus on the cross, it also ought to describe you and me. Jesus told us to “take up our cross daily.” This is the way he expects us to live. And living that way will mean at least these three things. First, it will mean that we face only one direction. We are passionate and committed in our following of Jesus. Second, it will mean that we can never turn back – even if the rest of the world does. Third, it will mean that we no longer have any plans of our own. Following Christ – and following Christ’s example – we empty ourselves, we let go of what we think is ours, and we choose a humble, obedient path.

Jesus is, of course, that man on the cross. But his way of living – and his willingness to go to the cross – should define our lives as well.

*Lord Jesus,
I praise you for what you have done.
I praise you for your willing, obedient sacrifice.
I praise you for emptying yourself,
for taking on the form of a servant,
and for being obedient even to death.
Because of what you have done,
I am saved.
In your example, though,
I hear a calling for me to live a certain way.
I hear a calling to take on an attitude –
and a way of living –
that is just like yours.
And as attractive as that is –
and as clear as your calling is –*

*I am afraid because I know how costly it will be
for me to live that way.
Still, I pray that you would
empower me to live that way
despite the cost.
Lord, I resolve to face in one direction.
Lord, I resolve not turn back.
Lord, I resolve no longer to have any plans of my own.
I am sold out to you.
Amen*

Questions for reflection:

1. In Chapter Thirty-One, we learn about five believers who miraculously met Nik and spent time with him. Even more miraculous, perhaps, was the way that God had reached them in the first place. How did God reach you? Is there any part of your faith story that you consider miraculous?
2. In Chapter Thirty-One, we also meet *the toughest man that Nik had ever met*. As you think about this man's story, reflect on the way his character was changed by Jesus. How has your character been changed by Jesus – and how is it being changed even now? What Christ-like attitudes do you still need to take on?
3. At the end of the chapter, we hear powerful words uttered by this man: "Jesus is worth it. He is worth my life, my wife's life, and he is worth the lives of my children!" Are you able to say similar words? What is Jesus worth to you?

Thirty-Two: HeartSongs

Always Present

I Kings 19:1-18

In I Kings 19, we encounter Elijah running for his life. He has just had a “mountaintop experience” on Mount Carmel. God has sent fire from heaven and Elijah has been “the prophet of record” in that great victory. Immediately following that great victory, however, King Ahab threatens Elijah. Elijah runs away and hides. He hides from Ahab certainly, but if we read the story carefully, he also seems to be hiding from God.

In commenting on the story, writer Richard Foster makes this observation: “even in Elijah’s running away, God met him in his solitude.”

Sometimes we feel as if we need to create the right conditions to meet God. Sometimes we feel that whether or not God shows up is dependent on our preparation, our ability, our effort. Whether it is a worship service or a devotional time, we tend to believe that what happens is up us – and dependent on the conditions that we create. What happens here to Elijah, however, suggests something very different. Evidently, we do not need to create the conditions that make God’s presence possible.

In other words, God shows up wherever and whenever he chooses.

In fact, not only did Elijah *not* create the conditions for God to show up – he was actually working *against* those conditions. Elijah was actively trying to remove himself from God’s presence – and God still found him.

While he was running away, God met him.

What an encouragement it is to know that God can always find us. Even when we cannot create the right conditions for an encounter – and even when we might be working *against* that encounter – God can always find us. What matters is not our ability to create something that might make a meeting with God possible – what matters is God’s commitment to show up . . . no matter what.

British poet Francis Thompson wrote a book entitled *The Hound of Heaven*, a book based on this same theme – a book that describes God’s relentless pursuit of us. As he tried to run away from God, Thompson says that he could not outrun “those strong feet that followed . . . with unhurrying chase and unperturbed pace.” His experience convinced him that God was going to catch him – no matter how hard he tried to keep that from happening. God, according to Thompson, is the hound of heaven!

Depending on where we happen to be right now, that is either really terrible news – or the best news that we can imagine. We cannot get away from God. When we desire his presence, he is always there. And even when we choose to run away from him, he is always there.

Indeed, we do not need to make things a certain way so that he will show up. He will show up whenever he wants. He will show up even when we are running away.

*Relentless God,
you pursue me.
Where can I go to flee from you?
Even when I try to escape you,
you are present with me.
You are relentless in your pursuit.
But why, God, would I try to escape you?
Your pursuit of me
is an expression of your devoted love.
You pursue me for my own good.
Despite the way I sometimes act,
I long for your embrace.
I know that, without your pursuit, I am lost.
I realize that the way you pursue me
is the same way that you pursue
every person on this planet.
So I am, once again, drawn back
to your passion for the whole world.
I am drawn back to my part in telling the world
the story of your love.
I dare not keep the gift of your pursuit
to myself.
I gladly share it with a broken world.
I gladly share it especially with people
who are running away.
Amen*

Questions for reflection:

1. What are your HeartSongs? If you were isolated from your faith community – and all alone, what songs would fill your mind and heart? Are those songs present in your corporate worship now?
2. We often see God's guidance – and his presence with us – most clearly when we look back. As you look back on your life, where can you identify God's guidance of you and his presence with you? Are you able to recognize his presence even in times when he seemed very far away? How exactly do you sense his presence with you now? In your life today, where does he seem to be guiding you?

Thirty-Three: What If He Is Alive?

Deceptive Finality

Mark 15:42-47

One of the most troubling parts of the gospel story is how fast things change from Sunday to Friday during the days leading up to Jesus' crucifixion. On Sunday of that week, Jesus makes his way into Jerusalem among cheering and adoring crowds. He is celebrated as a hero and welcomed as a friend. Today, we call that day "Palm Sunday." In a matter of days, however, there is a dramatic turn. The cheering is replaced by jeering. And the crowds that cry out their adoration quickly give way to crowds that call for crucifixion.

By the end of the week, Jesus is dead. If we were to put a title on Mark 15:42-47, we might call this part of the story, "It Sure Looks Like It's Over to Me."

Some scholars are critical of Joseph of Arimathea. They say that he should have spoken up sooner and that he should have done something before Jesus' death. On the other hand, his behavior at this point in the story is remarkably courageous. He is one of the Jewish leaders – and he stands as evidence that not *all* of the Jewish leaders wanted Jesus to be put to death. Joseph went boldly to Pilate and dared to ask for Jesus' body. Eventually, the request was granted. Joseph prepared Jesus' body for burial and then placed the body in a cave-like tomb. He then rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb.

There is nothing like a burial to tell us that the story is over.

Earlier in Chapter Sixteen of *The Insanity of God*, we read about the death of sixteen-year-old Tim, the son of Nik and Ruth. Tim died suddenly in Nairobi as he was rushed to the hospital early on Easter morning of 1997. About a week or so later, hundreds of people gathered for a memorial service in the outdoor amphitheater at the school where Tim had been a high school sophomore. Rain started to fall just as the service came to an end. At the conclusion of the service, the gathered group walked down the hill to the place where Tim was to be buried, right there on the school campus.

Here are some reflections from a journal entry written by someone who was there that day:

After we prayed and sang down there at the bottom of the hill, Nik and Ruth led about six hundred people back up the hill for a time of fellowship and reception. For some reason, I stayed there at the graveside. There were about twelve of us who stayed there, the others Kenyan workers and helpers, friends of Nik and Ruth. I felt that I was there representing the family. Nik and Ruth, I am sure, knew what was about to happen, but I was completely unaware of Kenyan tradition. Nik and Ruth had to be back at the school with the people, but I was able to stay by the graveside.

In just a few moments, I realized what was about to happen. I will never forget the instant when it dawned on me that we were going to bury Tim.

The casket was lowered into the grave – with just ropes and hands – and then four people picked up shovels and began filling the grave. When they were tired, others took their places. I found myself doing what everybody else was doing. Shovels were passed around. Sometimes people simply used their hands. The rain, the tears, the sweat; who could tell the difference? Sometimes we worked in silence. Sometimes there was a story or two. Sometimes there was even laughter. Sometimes there were wails of grief. Red, wet Kenyan mud was everywhere. And together, literally, we buried Tim.

There was no stone, but we did exactly what Joseph of Arimathea did.

There is nothing quite like a burial to tell us that the story is over.

Except . . . that is not quite true. The truth of this story – and the truth of every good burial – is that the finality is a deception. The story is not over at all! No stone is ever the last act when it is rolled up against something in which God has a part. And that is not just true about death. There are so many things that we are inclined to put away. “Well, that’s the end of that!” we say. “That’s the end of that chapter. That’s finally over.”

Get a shovel. Roll a stone. Close it up. It’s over.

But God does not pay much attention to our finalities. He has so many ways of opening up things that are sealed up tight. And the fact that he can do that here with Jesus . . . means that he can do that with Tim . . . and it means that he can do that with you and me too.

And the fact that God can do that with death means that he can do that with all of our other finalities as well. All those places where we have decided that God is not going to work. All those people we have labeled as beyond God’s power to reach. All those relationships that we have written off.

We simply must understand this: we think we know what the finalities are . . . but God barely even notices.

There is nothing quite like a burial to tell us that the story is over.

Except the story is not over at all.

Joseph rolls a stone against the entrance to the tomb. But we should not pay too much attention to the stone. God barely notices the stone at all.

*Life-giving,
Death-defying
God,
forgive me for saying that the story is over.
I look at the world and I see only
impossibility.
I know when something is over.
I know when it is time to give up hope.
I know what a burial means.
But you shake your head
at my foolish pronouncements.
You tell me quietly
that you hold every story in your hands.
You assure me that no story is finished
until you say that it is finished.
Forgive me for giving up.
Forgive me for walking away.
Forgive me for deciding
exactly where you can work –
and where you cannot work.
Forgive me for declaring that certain people
are beyond your reach.
Indeed, you are the God who
gives life and defies death.
Despite my convictions
about finalities,
I trust you.
Amen*

Questions for reflection:

1. What are some of the finalities in your life right now? In your heart, what are the limits that define what God can do? Are there people in your life who seem to be beyond the reach of God? Are there situations that seem so

difficult that are pretty sure that they will never be fixed? Are there places in the world that seem too far away for God's activity? What is it that you consider "impossible" in your life right now? What do you think God would say to you in response to that?

2. What is the difference between "living for Jesus" and "living with Jesus"? If you had to choose one of those ways of living, which one would you choose? Why?

Victorious Suffering

Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12

This passage is one of the so-called Servant Songs in Isaiah. If we ever needed to be reminded that God's ways are not our ways, this fourth Servant Song makes that point very clear. This passage is one of the best known passages in all the Old Testament. Almost every verse in Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12 is quoted somewhere in the New Testament. This is a remarkable passage that points squarely to the death – and to the resurrection – of Christ. And some people consider these verses to be the very heart of Old Testament Scripture.

Beyond all of that, this passage is a startling reminder of God's unusual ways. We are reminded here that God has a radically different perspective. The world says one thing – but God says something else. The world reaches one conclusion – but God comes to a different assessment. The world is disappointed that things do not turn out better – but God claims that everything has turned out just right. That is the message of this fourth Servant Song.

We start today with the middle section of the song, Isaiah 53:1-9. This is what certain people say about the servant. This is what the world sees. In this section, we find a report about a terrible, terrible event – an event that the world considers a failure, a tragedy, a disaster. The theme of this middle section of the song is suffering. The servant here is described as the man of sorrows.

Verses 1-3 in Isaiah describe the servant's unlikely beginning. The environment for his arrival is hostile – he is like a root growing out of dry ground. When he arrives, there is nothing about him that is attractive. He is, in fact, unimpressive in every way. People are repulsed by him. And he is exposed to scorn, rejection, sorrow, grief, and loneliness. He looks like he could be anything *except* called out and chosen by God!

Verses 4-6 describe the servant's suffering. The suffering is so bad, in fact, that the world concludes that God is punishing the servant for some unspeakable crime. The world generally buys into a pretty harsh view of things; specifically, the world tends to claim that people generally get what they deserve. So the conclusion is that the servant has done something terrible to deserve his immense suffering. But it turns out that the servant's suffering has nothing to do with sin –

at least, not his own sin. His suffering is vicarious suffering – suffering that is done on behalf of others. He is wounded, crushed, bruised – and left all alone in his suffering. The suffering is devastating, but he does not deserve it at all.

Verses 7-9 describe the servant's death. His terrible suffering leads ultimately to his death. Surprisingly, he is silent through the entire ordeal. He does not say a word. He dies the death of a sinner, and he is buried among the wicked. He is placed in the grave.

It is no wonder that this servant is called “the suffering servant.” It is no wonder that we call him “man of sorrows.”

But that is not all that this servant song is about. The beginning of the song (Isaiah 52:13-15) and the end of the song (Isaiah 53:10-12) reveal the true focus of the story. And the true focus of the story is not on the suffering, but on the victory. The middle section of the song reflects the view of the world – but the beginning and the end of the song provide us with the assessment of God. What exactly does God say about all this? Well, God certainly sees the servant's suffering, but God sees something else as well.

Consider God's perspective. The world is offended by the servant's suffering. The world cannot bear even to look at the servant. The world is horrified by his physical appearance. *But this is all part of God's plan. This is all God's will. This is precisely how God has chosen to deal with sin.* If we read Isaiah 52:13-15 and Isaiah 53:10-12, we are stunned into silence at the strangeness of God's ways.

We began this devotional study by talking about our erroneous view that if we do what is right, God will surely keep us safe. We want so much to believe that faithfulness will always result in blessing (and we will typically go even further and claim that we know exactly what “blessing” is). But if that is the truth, then Jesus would never have ended up on the cross. In the nick of time, the Father would have intervened. Before Jesus' death, the Father would have stepped in and he would have said, “No you don't! This is my Son! Leave him alone!”

But that is not what happened at all.

Could it be that Jesus' suffering was specifically part of God's plan? Could it be that Jesus' suffering was a *necessary* part of God's plan? Could it be that the cross was not some terrible accident – but something that, by God's determination, simply had to happen? Could it be that it was “the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer” (53:10).

And could it be that the suffering of followers of Jesus is part of God's plan as well?

The central theme in this passage – and the central theme in all of Scripture – is that this suffering servant will gain victory in the end. This is ultimately a story of triumph. But he will gain the victory not *in spite of the suffering* – but *because of it!*

And that is a crucial word for those of us who desire to avoid suffering at all cost. Much to our amazement, sometimes the suffering is exactly what God has in mind. And we can live with that because we know – without any doubt! – that God knows exactly what he is doing. We can live with that because we know – without any doubt! – that this is ultimately a song of victory.

For weeks now, we have been reading stories of profound suffering. At this point, we might be wondering what all those brothers and sisters in Christ did wrong to deserve such pain. We might pridefully wonder if perhaps they were not faithful – and that perhaps their suffering was punishment for their unfaithfulness. We might even pat ourselves on the back and feel that we have somehow done something right to avoid that kind of suffering.

The truth, however, is that our persecuted brothers and sisters likely understand the perspective of God much more than we do. And they likely read Isaiah 52:12 – 53:12 with very different eyes.

Yes, God will have his way. Yes, God will win in the end. But God will use Jesus' suffering – and he will use our suffering as well – to gain his victory. God will use suffering to redeem this broken world.

Ultimately, God will have his way not in spite of the suffering, but because of it.

*God,
I love to talk about victory.
But I am sobered by the path
that you set before me.
Yes, that path leads to victory –
but that path goes directly through the valley of suffering.
I realize that I can add nothing to what Jesus has done,
but I also understand
that I am called to share in his sufferings.
I do not understand why it should be that way.
More to the point, I do not understand you.
Even so, I am committed to you.
I submit to you.
You are my Lord.
And that means that
if my suffering is part of your plan,
then I will embrace that suffering.
I will embrace that suffering
for your glory
and for my good.
Lord God, your ways are not my ways.*

*My thoughts are not your thoughts.
But you are God
and I am not.
Amen*

Questions for reflection:

1. Are you willing to accept – and even embrace – suffering if God leads you into it? Do you believe that there is a way to be utterly faithful to God’s call that will avoid suffering?
2. How do explain the fact that so many believers around the world are suffering profoundly for their faithfulness – while many believers in other settings are not suffering (at least, not in the same way)? If you were able to sit down and talk with persecuted brothers and sisters in Christ, what questions would you ask them? What do you think they would want to ask you?

Thirty-Four: It's All a Miracle . . . and the Journey Begins

Sacrificing Our Supposed Security

Exodus 16:1-3

In a dramatic way, God has rescued his people and set them free. Enslaved in Egypt, without any real hope of anything ever being different, God has stepped in and brought about a miraculous change. The people have seen, with their own eyes, that God is able. God has not only brought them out of Egypt – he has also brought them through the Red Sea. Amazingly, God has set his people free.

But this freedom has an odd look – at least at this point in the story. At this point in the story, freedom looks like . . . wilderness. Freedom looks uncertain. Freedom looks dangerous. And all of a sudden, a frightening thought crosses the minds of these wide-eyed pilgrims: *is freedom something we really want?* This life of freedom is so difficult, in fact, that they begin to think fondly of Egypt. They begin to think about how things used to be.

Granted, life was not perfect in Egypt. The people had to work hard and the conditions were brutal, but there was a measure of safety in Egypt. There was a measure of security in Egypt. It was not a great life, but at least it was a *known* life.

And the people honestly begin to wonder if what they had in Egypt was better than this “freedom” that God has given them. “We were secure back in Egypt,” they think. “And this new freedom that we have feels downright scary. Egypt was not really all that bad, was it?”

Of course, their memories of Egypt are distorted. Deeply distorted. They dreamed about “the good old days” that really were not good at all. But here in the wilderness – in this terribly insecure setting – distorted memories take center stage. “Don’t you remember how good it was back in Egypt?” the people say to one another (16:3). “Back in Egypt, we ate all the food we wanted.” We find the same distorted memories in Numbers 11:5: “We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost – also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic.” *But you cannot get any of that out here in the wilderness . . .*

There are a couple of problems with this kind of remembering.

First, it is simply not honest. This kind of remembering is distorted. It calls to mind a time in Egypt that never really existed. It ignores the brutal reality of the way life actually was back in Egypt.

The second problem is even more serious. The ancient Hebrews were dreaming about a kind of security that does not really exist. It did not exist back in Egypt; it simply does not exist anywhere in this life. They want so much to know how things will be for them; they want to know what will happen next. But they simply cannot know those things – in Egypt or out here in the wilderness.

Security is an idol. It is an idol that holds remarkable power over human beings, but it is an idol nonetheless.

And unless we guard against it, this is how we begin to think: *It is too risky to serve God. It is too risky to make sacrifices. It is too risky to go out on mission. It is too risky to get involved in the lives of other people. It is too risky to be generous with my resources. It is too risky to share my faith. It is too risky to trust God with my future.*

So we come to the ultimate question.

Will we stay in Egypt? Or will we follow the call of God? That is surely the question of the Book of Exodus, but that is also the question that you and I deal with every day. On the one hand, there is the idol of security (distorted though it may be). On the other hand, there is the adventure (and danger!) of walking obediently with God.

If we look back and remember our lives *before* we began this grand adventure of walking with Jesus – and if those memories cause us to think that life back then was something wonderful – then our memories are not honest. As dangerous as this adventure with Jesus may be, we would not consider exchanging this adventure for the life we had before we started walking with Jesus. We need honest memories; life was miserable back in Egypt – and there is no way in the world that we would ever choose that life over the one we have now.

We were made for this risky pilgrimage with this God who can rescue his people and part the Red Sea and provide manna in the wilderness. We were made for this very adventure. And we will never be whole until we embrace all that Jesus has in store for us.

God would never dream of allowing us to settle for the idol of security when there is abundant life to be found in this journey of trust and obedience.

Do we really want to go back to Egypt?

Our memories are playing tricks on us. That life that we knew before this adventure began was not nearly as good as we think it was. And, honestly, it was not secure at all. Why would we ever settle for that – when we can actually walk with God here and now?

There is no future in Egypt. The only future is found on pilgrimage with this great and glorious God. This God who knows exactly what he is doing. This God who is going somewhere. This God who is able to accomplish his purposes. This God who knows that the only true security can be found in him.

This is an easy choice. The people of God *always* choose to journey with God. Always.

*Lord God,
I choose you.
Egypt calls to me.
I think of earlier days
and I think that those earlier days were better,
safer, more secure, more predictable.
But my mind is playing tricks on me.
Even though life with you – now –
seems dangerous and risky and unpredictable,
I would not trade what I have with you now
for anything!
What a joy to be on journey with you!
What a joy to be part of this holy adventure!
I refuse to bow down to the idol of security.
I place my life in your hands.
And if you call me to hard places,
if you call me into the wilderness,
if you call me into the unknown,
that is exactly where I want to be.
Quite simply,
I want to be with you.
Lord God,
I choose you.
Amen*

Questions for reflection:

1. Compare your life of adventure with Jesus now with your life before you began walking with him. What exactly did you leave behind when you decided to walk with Jesus? Do you have any desire for your life as it was before you sold out to Jesus?

2. Are you ready to take some additional steps to grow even deeper in your relationship with Jesus? What specific actions is God leading you to embrace?
3. How are you different because of your study of *The Insanity of God*? At this point, what will you do next? How will this study affect your behavior, your attitudes, your theology, your prayer life, and your life with other believers in community?
4. What are three or four themes or truths that will stay with you as a result of this study? How will you keep these themes or truths fresh and alive in your heart?