

Burst Into Flames

A Parable

By Richard McInteer

Now the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ Jesus, will personally restore, establish, strengthen, and support you after you have suffered...

1 Peter 5:10

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CHAPTER 1

"I am faint and severely crushed; I groan because of the anguish of my heart."
Psalm 38:8

"It was like a long nightmare. I kept hoping I would wake up. I'm still wishing I would wake up and find out it was all a terrible dream."

Blake silently stared into his coffee for a long time, then continued, "Twenty-six days, that was all we had. The day it all started, I was at work. Everything seemed so normal...then I got the call. From that moment, nothing was normal."

The two men fell back into silence, one lost in his thoughts, the other waiting patiently. The coffee shop was full of activity on this spring evening, but both men were unaware of their surroundings.

Blake spoke quietly, "Did I ever tell you how we met?"

Mark, stroking his beard and undisturbed by the shift in the conversation, said, "No, I don't think so."

Blake began speaking, "Back when I was still living in Richmond, there was a little sandwich place around the corner from my office. I had run down there to grab a bite of lunch. As I left the restaurant, I saw Elaine for the first time. She was picking up lunch for her office and she had just a bit more than one person can carry. She was making a good effort, but she dropped a bag of sandwiches just as I was about to walk past her. She tried to get the dropped bag and almost lost everything else.

"I picked up the bag from the sidewalk and tried to hand it to her. She thanked me for the help and gave me one of her amazing smiles. As I got this good look at her, I suddenly decided I wasn't in such a big hurry to get back to the office. I offered to help this pretty, slim red-head carry her load. While she didn't want to be a burden, she knew that she really needed some help.

"We divided the load between us and I walked with this lovely creature, wondering at how I could ever get so lucky. Her office was in the building right next to where my office was located. As we walked we talked. She was so easy to talk to. I found myself being disappointed when we reached her office. We set everything down and her office-mates descended on the food like a bunch of piranha. Elaine thanked me as she walked with me back to the elevator.

"While I knew she was out of my league, I knew that luck had served me well that day, so I asked her if she would like to go to dinner or something. She really startled me by asking me, 'Are you a Christian?'"

"The first of several possible answers that popped into my head was, 'Well, sort of' but I ended up answering her with a simple 'Yes'. She looked at me for a long moment, as if she was weighing my answer or waiting for somebody to tell her what to do, then she replied with, 'Let's meet for lunch...at the sandwich shop...tomorrow, OK?'

"I was hooked. I would have met her on the moon in 5 minutes if that had been the plan. Even though I had only known her for a few minutes, I could tell that she was nothing like any of the other girls I had ever known. I virtually danced back to work. Back at the office, Andy asked me, 'What's come over you? You couldn't have won the lottery because you wouldn't have come back here.' I told him, 'You're close. I just met the most amazing girl. I hardly know her, but I wouldn't be surprised if she was the one.'"

Blake slipped into silence as he relived the feelings.

Now curious, Mark prompted Blake, "So, did you meet her the next day?"

"I sure did, after acting like a schoolboy in anticipation. I actually put on 3 different shirts that morning before work. I remember thinking that noon was never going to roll around. I was at the sandwich shop 20 minutes early, feeling really awkward. It didn't help that Andy 'just happened' to come by the sandwich shop about 10 minutes behind me, hoping to catch a look at the gal that had such an effect on me. She showed up about 5 minutes before our planned time. I guess this meeting might have been awkward, but you know how Elaine is, it is impossible to be awkward around her..."

Suddenly Blake stopped when he heard himself using present-tense to describe Elaine. It was as if he was a balloon with the air being let out.

After a moment, Mark said, "So, how did the lunch date go?"

"It was pretty good, I guess" Blake replied absently.

Mark pushed a little harder, "So, what do you remember about that lunch."

Blake responded, "I don't know...well, I do remember being surprised when she ordered jalapeños on her sandwich, just like I always did.

"It threw me a bit when we got our sandwiches, because she didn't pick hers up. Instead she waited for a pause in the conversation, bowed her head and prayed silently over her meal. Then, I also remember feeling a little on-the-spot when she asked more about my Christian faith. Most of my real Christian experience came from high school youth group. My current attempts to maintain Christianity consisted of going to church once-in-a-while, so to portray my faith positively to her was a huge challenge. While I wanted to make a good impression on her, I felt like I had to be completely honest with her.

"Her Christian faith was always the most important thing to her. Her faith was so big, I had never met anybody that lived their faith like she did. I remember once when we were planning to go hiking the following weekend, but the weatherman said that it was going to rain. She said with 100% confidence, that she and God had talked and it was not going to rain on our hike. We kept our plans, even though the weather forecast never changed. It was perfectly dry for our hike, but 5 minutes after we got back to the car, it started to downpour.

"She really did have amazing faith," Blake paused, then said, "but I guess her faith still wasn't much of a match for lymphatic cancer."

Mark said, "From what I saw, her faith really did sustain her well through the illness. I know the hospital staff was all impressed by her."

Blake replied, "She's still dead. She could pray for the healing of others and see God answer in miraculous ways, but it didn't help her."

Mark spoke gently saying, "I wish I could give you an explanation that would make sense, but there are so many things about life and death that we will just never understand."

"I guess," Blake answered flatly.

"Blake, I really don't know how you are making it, but I'm going to have to get on home or I'll never be able to get up for work in the morning. You know, that the offer to come stay with us as long as you need, is still available or if there is anything Beth or I can do for you, all you have to do is ask."

"I do appreciate what you've been doing. I think I'd go crazy if I didn't have somebody to talk to."

Mark asked, "So what about you, have you been thinking about going back to work yet?"

"I don't know, while I think it would be good to have something to keep my mind busy, I just don't think I can cope with the people yet," Blake said as he shook the hands of his older friend and they got up to go their separate ways.

CHAPTER 2

"I have loved you with an everlasting love" Jeremiah 31:3

Blake got back to his apartment. He wandered from room-to-room, knowing that Elaine wouldn't be there, but he couldn't help himself. In every room, on every surface,

he saw evidence of Elaine's life and influence. These things were both reassuring and also a sad reminder that she wasn't there.

He began preparing for bed. His mind wandered back to that first lunch date with Elaine. He could picture her sitting in that sandwich shop, looking at him with those big green eyes and displaying that wonderful smile, with her short, red hair shining in the light. That was where she had invited him to her church.

The first time he went with her to Calvary Gospel had been quite an eye-opener. All of Blake's church experiences had been in big churches where people were pretty restrained. Calvary Gospel was a small church where everybody knew everybody. The really shocking thing about this little church was the enthusiasm with which they approached every aspect of worship. Before Calvary Gospel, Blake had always had a very different idea of what it was to worship God. At this church, they expected God to take the lead, they knew He would answer prayers and they counted on His miracles.

Without the people of Calvary, Blake was certain he would have never made it through Elaine's illness and funeral. The people of the church, people like Mark, really seemed to care.

He still didn't know why, when the prayers of Calvary Gospel had resulted in so many miracles, why Elaine had died. Why, when he really needed God, wasn't He there? He just never had the faith that Elaine had.

The next morning, Blake got thinking of Mark's question about going back to work. He wasn't sure if he could cope with the job and the people right now, but he also knew that he would have to go back sometime. It had been almost a month-and-a-half since he had been at work. He couldn't keep paying bills out of savings.

He decided that it would be a good idea to get a feel for what work was like. He called Andy Renfro, his work buddy, to see if he wanted to meet for lunch sometime. Blake hadn't spoken to Andy since the funeral, and that was hardly a real conversation.

Andy sounded glad to hear from him and said, "Sure, lunch would be great, could you do it today? I'm going to be on the road most of next week."

Blake hadn't even thought through that it was Friday. "OK, yes, today is good. How does noon at Chipotle's sound?"

Andy agreed and finished with, "You won't believe all the stuff that's been going on around here. I'll fill you in when I see you."

As Blake waited for the hours to pass, he found himself thinking about his last day at work, what seemed like his last day of sanity.

He had been sitting at his desk, going over accounts on the computer, when his cell phone rang. He saw from the caller ID that it was Elaine. He knew immediately that she was calling to tell him what the doctor had said.

Elaine had been feeling totally exhausted for a couple of weeks. This was so very unlike her. Elaine was typically a bundle of energy. Blake often felt like he was running to keep up with her. But more recently, she was waking up feeling like she could go right back to bed.

Then, she had noticed some swelling on the left side of her neck, just below her jawbone. The final straw for her came when several people asked her if she was losing weight. At that point, she abandoned her normal dislike for doctors and decided it was

time to ask a doctor what was going on. She called Dr. Austin's office and made an appointment.

Knowing that she should be getting out of her appointment about now, Blake answered his phone eager to hear what Dr. Austin had said. Blake answered, "Hi Darling, what do you know?"

"Blake," Elaine spoke his name in a tone that immediately told him something was wrong, very wrong. "You know I had a bad feeling about this. Dr. Austin is really concerned. He is sending me directly over to the hospital for some tests. Can you leave work and be with m-me?"

Blake had never heard his perky, enthusiastic wife sound like this, so small and pitiful. He said, "You know I'd do anything for you. I'll meet you there in 10 minutes."

Blake dashed down to his manager's office and gave Jim a 15 second explanation and was running for his car. The drive to the hospital seemed to take forever.

Blake had wanted to go to the doctor appointment with Elaine, but she kept saying, "You just go to work, I'm a big girl, I can take myself to the doctor." Now, Blake was wishing he had taken her anyway.

As he met up with Elaine in the hospital parking lot and they walked into the hospital, he had no idea that she was never going to come back out.

The next 26 days were a total blur of doctors, nurses, needles, drugs, machines, scans, readings and periods of chaotic activity followed by interminable waits.

Not long after they arrived, a new doctor showed up. He introduced himself as Dr. Henderson. He said, "Mrs. Jacobs, may I call you Elaine?"

Elaine nodded.

The doctor continued, "Based on your physical examination and the symptoms you describe, your illness sounds like it could be a cancer. I am a member of the hospital's oncology team. I was brought in to figure out exactly what we are up against here. At this point we cannot be positive if you have a cancer, what type it might be or exactly what that means for you. It will be my job, and the job of our whole group of oncology experts to answer those questions. For right now, I will be ordering a series of tests that will allow us to get some answers."

That was the first time somebody had actually spoken the word, "cancer" as a possible diagnosis. Blake figured they were pretty sure of the diagnosis before they spoke this fear-inducing word, but at the same time he pushed the idea aside as absurd.

With the speaking of this terrible sounding diagnosis, Elaine underwent the most incredible change. When she came into the hospital she was jittery and anxious, as if her normal peace was just out of her reach. When Dr. Henderson announced that she might have cancer she immediately went calm and relaxed.

Blake, on the other hand was going nuts. Right after the doctor left the room, Blake started, "What an idiot! I can't believe that he would go and scare you, telling you this is cancer, when it's probably just a virus or something! We need to get you out of this place and take you..."

"Blake" Elaine spoke his name so calmly and so definitively, that it brought him to a complete stop, mid-rant. He turned to her with his arms still up in the air.

Quietly, she said, "Blake, he's right. God just spoke to me. Now I understand. I know for a certainty that I do have cancer. I know for a certainty that I going to die of it. I know for a certainty that I don't have much time, but I also know that He is going to be

with me and take care of me, through it all. I also know that He will take care of you if you just allow Him to.”

Blake was totally shocked. He wanted to argue with her, to tell her she was a crazy as the doctor, but somehow, all he could do was to hold her with tears flowing down his face.

It was a couple of days later, after a biopsy, blood work and a CT scan, they found out that Elaine had stage IV DLBCL, that's “diffuse large b-cell lymphoma.” He learned more than he ever wanted to know about cancer.

All of the medical activity just seemed like some kind of mocking background noise as he watched his Elaine just get worse and worse. Blake's sense of total powerlessness was tearing him up.

It seemed that all of the efforts of the doctors only served to make her worse. Her first chemo treatment almost killed her. She spiked a high fever that the medical staff was barely able to control.

Through it all, Elaine was amazing. She was a real blessing to everybody she encountered, even though it was obvious that she was sick and hurting. It seemed she always had a smile and a kind word for every person that got close to her. She must have told dozens of people about how God was with her and was going to take care of her right up until he took her home to be with Him in heaven.

Blake didn't share her peace about the whole thing. He had no choice but to watch as the love of his life disintegrated. Over the two years Blake and Elaine had been together, he had come to respect the statement whenever she started with, “God and I have talked and...” He knew that when she said she was going to die of cancer, then she was going to die of her cancer, but that didn't mean he was going to like it. There was no way he was going to let go of his precious Elaine without a fight.

The last few days, Elaine was in the ICU and basically unconscious. The doctors told Blake that her body was shutting down and it wouldn't be long. From time-to-time, she would wake and say a few words. Those words frequently made no sense.

During these days, Blake never wanted to leave her side, afraid that she would wake and he wouldn't be there. Elaine's parents had come down, but even with them staying with Elaine, he could not bear the thought that she might wake and he might miss it.

It was around 2 p.m. on March 27th. Blake was in Elaine's ICU room with Bob and Pat Ryan, Elaine's parents. Blake was holding her hand and staring blankly at a talk show on the TV. Elaine's father was sending a message on His phone and her mom was reading her Bible. Suddenly, they were all interrupted by Elaine's voice, “Blake?”

Immediately, they all clustered around her bed. Blake said, “I'm here, baby.”

Pat said, “Elaine darling, your father and I are here, too.”

Elaine looked at them and said, more clearly than she had spoken for a week or more, “Jesus is here. He has come to get me to take me home. I love you guys.”

There was a quick round of “We love you, too” statements.

Elaine spoke to Blake. “Jesus says to tell you that He loves you more than you can imagine and He will be ready to give you comfort in the coming days, all you have to do is let him. Heaven is going to be wonderful. Blake, come and join me there.” With that final statement, her eyes closed and she went silent.

Within half an hour, they were assaulted by the horrible, long tone that pierced Blake's heart and told him that his precious Elaine was gone.

CHAPTER 3

"He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds." Psalm 147:3

Blake sat listening to Andy in the restaurant. Andy went through an excited dissertation of all the news at work. There was a long description of how a married manager had gotten caught having an affair with a girl from marketing. He told about a major new customer that had been landed, which was making everybody extremely busy. It seemed that Andy was intentionally dominating the conversation in order to avoid Blake's circumstance.

Finally Andy seemed to run out of news. The two men were silent for a bit, then with resignation, Andy pushed his glasses up on his nose and asked, "So, how are you doing with things?"

Blake recognized that Andy was uncomfortable with his mourning, so he responded with a question, "How do you think people will treat me when I come back to work?"

Andy appeared slightly surprised by the question. He mulled it over. The more he thought about the question, the more seriously he took it. Finally he said, "I think you might have a few hours where people are uncomfortable or trying to offer some sort of condolences, but I think that after some initial time things will go back to normal. The people in the office mostly like and respect you. We are also really busy and could use your help."

Now it was Blake's turn to be surprised. Andy's answer was more thoughtful and reasoned that what Blake expected out of Andy. He said, "You really think so? I just really want to get some normalcy back into my life. If I could find that at work, I really think it would be good for me."

Andy said, "We would love to have you back."

Blake responded, "I'm not sure if I am quite ready quite yet, but it is good to know that it is an option."

"So, what sort of timetable are you thinking?"

"I don't know. Next week, I think I'll call in and talk to Jim about setting something up for my return."

Andy said, "I bet you could show up at the office Monday morning and everybody would be thrilled, even if you hadn't told Jim you were coming back."

"I wouldn't recommend holding your breath waiting on me to walk in there Monday morning, but I will be coming back soon," said Blake.

When Blake got back to his apartment, he got his mail. There was a letter from his insurance company. He opened it up and found a check for Elaine's life insurance. Blake stared at the check. He thought it was a sad comment that this company could possibly think that Elaine's life was worth this amount of money. It seemed like such an insult on her memory.

Blake wanted to rip the check to shreds.

He didn't want money. What good was money without having Elaine to share it with? He thought about what they could have done with this money, about how much fun they could have had. He would have given every penny he had to get Elaine back, even to have just little time with her again.

The check was shaking in his hand, but he could hardly see it through his tears. He just dropped the check to the floor, sat down and sobbed.

Sunday morning, Blake got himself ready for church. This would his first time to church in almost 2 months.

When Blake arrived, he went in and sat down with Mark and Beth, in his usual spot. It was always the four of them: Elaine and Blake, with Mark and Beth, they would sit together in Church, and then go to lunch afterwards. From time-to-time, somebody else would join them for lunch, but the 4 were always together.

Blake's church experience was slightly awkward. There were a lot of people that were offering help and condolences. During the church service, they prayed that he would find comfort, as he knew they had been praying for Elaine and himself since Elaine got sick. More than any other reason, going to church was awkward because Elaine wasn't there with him.

Blake had always thought of this church as "Elaine's church." Even though he had been attending Calvary Gospel Church since the Sunday after his first lunch date with Elaine, he had never felt completely like he belonged. He always felt slightly like an outsider. This is not to say that the people weren't welcoming, Blake just couldn't quite let himself relax into their community. He loved the enthusiasm and energy of the services at Calvary Gospel. Yet, he never felt quite like he shared what they had. He felt more like he was going-through-the-motions or pretending, than really participating. In some way, Blake felt jealous of the people at Elaine's church, they had something that he wanted, but he couldn't figure out how to get it.

He felt terribly embarrassed by his "not getting it." He had tried a couple of times to talk to Elaine about his problem, but she couldn't really understand that he didn't understand. She couldn't really help because she saw her faith as so terribly simple. To her, faith was like dropping a ball and having it fall to the ground – how could anybody have a problem with that?

Now, after Elaine's death, he missed her so much. This church and her faith were such huge parts of her life, that Blake felt he had to seek them in order to seek her.

During the sermon, Blake was having trouble concentrating. He only heard bits and pieces as he tuned-in and tuned-out. Then, as Pastor David was making some sort of a point, he read from Matthew 7:

*Enter through the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the road is broad that leads to destruction and there many go through it. How narrow is the gate and difficult the road that leads to life, and few find it.*¹

When Blake heard this verse, he was surprised and puzzled. Without thinking too much about it, he had always assumed that most people were going to heaven and only a few really bad people would be left out. In this simple statement, Jesus had said the exact

opposite. The idea that only a few would make it into heaven, was mind-boggling. He had never really thought too much at all about the afterlife, but now things were different.

He knew for a fact that Elaine was in heaven. If there was ever a time that he could be certain of a person's eternal destination, it was with Elaine. While she wasn't perfect, she had a relationship with her Lord that seemed to go to incredible lengths. The Lord couldn't turn His back on her, they shared a deep love.

CHAPTER 4

“Teach me, Lord” Psalm 119:34

After church, Blake found himself at an Italian restaurant with Mark, Beth and a young mother named Ellie, whose husband was out-of-the-country on a business trip. Beth and Ellie clustered around Ellie's infant girl, Hannah, talking baby and baby-talking. This left Mark and Blake to talk among themselves.

During a pause in their conversation, Blake brought up the scripture from Pastor David's sermon and how it was weighing heavily in his mind.

Mark said, “I wish that more people were destined for heaven. For something that is perfectly simple, it is so difficult, as to be impossible, for many people.”

Blake said, “So, if all they have to do is to pray a prayer and maybe get baptized, it seems like everybody would do that, even if they weren't sure about God, just to be sure they go to heaven.”

“I don't think a prayer like that would get anybody into heaven,” replied Mark.

“What do you mean?”

Mark explained, “To believe in Jesus is the foundation of what it means to be Christian. Nobody that fails to believe will go to heaven. Everybody knows John 3:16, where it says, 'that everyone who believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life,' so our belief, our faith, is critical.”

Mark continued, “Remember, God knows us from the inside. He knows real belief and he knows when somebody's faith is put-on. If somebody does like you suggested and recites a prayer, but their heart isn't in it, then I don't believe they can be saved. Like it says in Hebrews, 'Without faith it is impossible to please God'²”

As Blake wondered a little about his own faith, he asked, “OK, I understand that you can have a really bad person, who just says a prayer without meaning it, that he won't be saved just because he said the prayer. I can also see how God would be pleased with somebody that has no doubts about their belief in God, but what about all the people that aren't on those extreme positions?”

Mark said, “There was a time in my life when I was playing at being a Christian. I had the t-shirts and bumper-stickers, but my faith life was empty. On Sunday morning, I was right there doing everything right. My friends at church thought I had it going on. In truth, I was only a Sunday morning Christian. Monday through Saturday, I was too busy for God. During that time, I was miserable, but I couldn't put my finger on the cause.”

Blake thought this sounded like his life.

Mark went on, “Even though I was baptized and I had done all the external things, I'm not sure I would have ended up in heaven if I had died. This is all because I can now compare that cheap excuse for a relationship with God to a real relationship with Him.

As I look back on that time in my life, I realize that I didn't have God at all, all I had was church.”

Blake felt a lump in his gut that wasn't related to the lunch he had just consumed. He responded with, “Really, I always figured you for a person that just fell into your faith!”

Mark said, “I wish. I wasted a lot of years with a sad and empty version of Christianity”.

“So what was it that...” Blake thought for a moment, “changed you?”

“It was certainly something that God gets all the credit for, but He...”

At this point, Beth interrupted Mark, “Excuse me honey, but we need to take Ellie back to the church. Hanna's getting fussy. I think she's ready for her nap.”

Mark said, “OK, no problem.” Then to Blake, he said, “Blake, I need to run out to Morgantown to pick up some coins this afternoon. If you are available, I would love to have the company for the drive and we can finish our discussion.”

Blake was intrigued by the conversation and quickly agreed. They made plans that Mark would pick him up at his apartment in an hour.

When Blake got back to the apartment, he had the momentary surge of anticipation that Elaine might be there, which was quickly squashed by reality. As he passed through the living room to go to his bedroom to change clothes, he saw a piece of paper on the floor. He picked it up and immediately recognized it as the check from the insurance company. The memo on the check said “death benefit.”

“Like there is supposed to be any sort of a benefit to the death of someone like Elaine,” he thought to himself. He felt himself sinking back into that deep hole of depression.

He called Mark and said, “Listen Mark, I don't really think I'll be very good company today. How about I bow out of this Morgantown trip today?”

Mark recognized the flat tone of Blake's voice and said, “I didn't really get enough sleep last night, Beth isn't wanting me to go unless there is somebody else with me to keep me awake. Even if you just want to sit there without talking, it will make Beth happy. If you could possibly go with me, it would be a big help.”

Blake relented and agreed to go, once again.

After the phone call, Blake still knew that he was fighting depression. He tried hard to distract himself and think about anything except Elaine and his situation, but every line of thought looped right back there.

Knowing that Mark was coming to pick him up, Blake decided to follow up on their discussion at the restaurant. He opened his Bible to find the scripture that had caught his attention from the sermon. Finding the verses Pastor David had read, Blake decided to read the chapter in order to get some context, to try to understand if Jesus really meant what it sounded like, that very few people would be going to heaven. As he read beyond the original verses, he was shocked by what he found there.

CHAPTER 5

“For the Lord has comforted His people and will have compassion on His afflicted ones.”

Isaiah 49:13

Blake got into Mark's little blue Honda and they started on their way. Blake said, "So where is it we are going?"

Mark explained, "I bought some coins on Craig's List from a guy named Nick Sorenson in Morgantown. I've never met him or even spoken to him, we made all the arrangements by email. Do you know your way around Morgantown?"

Blake said, "All I know about Morgantown is how to get to the flea market right there as you get off at the Morgantown exit. Elaine and I went shopping there a couple of times."

Mark continued his explanation, "Anyway, I've got the Google Maps directions, but this guy has a set of quarters from the 20's that look to be in really good shape, the price was right, so here we are out for a Sunday drive on a beautiful day."

Although Blake didn't share Mark's passion for coin collecting, he had seen Mark's collection and got tickled by how excited Mark could get about his coins. To Blake there were just old coins, but to Mark, they all had interesting history and stories.

As they approached the interstate, Mark pulled off at a McDonald's and asked Blake if he wanted to get a drink for the road. Blake agreed and Mark got them a couple of drinks in the drive-thru. He then surprised Blake by pulling into a parking spot and turning off the car.

He said, "I'm supposed to tell you something and I don't really want to try to tell you this and drive at the same time." Mark's voice sounded somehow emotional, Blake was a bit concerned about what Mark was about to say.

Blake said tentatively, "OK."

Mark heard Blake's tone of voice and quickly said, "I'm sorry this isn't anything bad, well it is, but you don't need to worry...I'm doing this badly. Blake, what I am about to tell you is a precious gift. You know that Beth and I love you and have been praying continuously for you. Well, Beth feels so sorry for what you are going through that she wanted to give you something extremely special."

Mark took a deep breath and said, "OK here we go...So, you know that Beth and I are both 36 and we love kids, have you ever wondered why we never had kids?"

Blake answered, "Well, I once heard Beth say that it wasn't God's will. She seemed OK with it, so I never really thought too much about it."

Mark said, "I doubt God's will has much to do with the real reason, but I know she thinks about it in those terms."

"When she was a child she lived in Texas with her parents and brother. One day, when she was 11 years old, three boys in their late teens got her behind the school building and raped her. A neighbor grabbed his hunting rifle and caught them in the act," Mark's voice cracked and there were tears in his eyes.

Blake said, "Oh God!" Blake pictured in his mind an 11 year old that lives in his apartment building. He occasionally chatted with her and her parents. She seemed like such a little and innocent child at that age. Rape on a kid like that was just inconceivable.

Mark continued, "The harm these boys did to her was immense. The physical damage had her in the hospital for months. The emotional damage was even worse. She will never be able to have children."

"That's awful! So, just out of curiosity, what happened to the boys?" asked Blake.

“Not a darn thing. They ran when the man came out with his gun. He didn't know them, didn't even pay much attention to them. He was more concerned about Beth and whether she was even alive.”

Mark said, “It is truly a miracle of God that she...”

Blake interrupted, “Wait a minute, I remember her saying that her parents died when she was young, how old was she when that happened?”

“That was only 2 years later. Life seems to be returning to normal, then one day her parents go out, next thing she knows, she and her brother are orphans. They are uprooted from their home in Texas and brought here to live with an aunt they barely knew.”

Blake said, “How in the world did she cope with all that?”

Mark said, “That is the really incredible part of the story. Immediately after the rape, Beth was like a zombie, she just stared into space. There were apparently tons of people praying for her, but perhaps her parents were the only ones more faithful than her youth pastor. Almost every day, he came to her hospital bed, held her hand and prayed and cried for her. As she stared coming out of that zombie-mode, he would talk to her. By the grace of God, Beth never could, and still can't, consciously remember the rape, but it still affected her, it was like her soul was ripped apart.

“One day, after she had been in the hospital for about a month, this youth minister led her to surrender her life to Jesus. From that moment, she started to rapidly become whole. Her psychologist was convinced that she was just suppressing her struggles, he just didn't realize that she had real help. He wouldn't let her out of treatment, mostly just because he couldn't explain the miracle of her healing.

“She has always leaned heavily on Jesus to help her through her struggles and He has always been faithful. A couple of years later when her parents died, then she and her brother had to be uprooted, she had Jesus to catch her and lift her back up. I think that if most adults experienced half the emotional trauma she went through as a kid, they would wind up in the looney-bin. The only way that Beth survived was by the power of Jesus.

“Beth wanted you to hear her story. She wants you to know that Jesus will be there for you and she personally knows that He is able to take the ruins of a life and recover it.”

Blake responded with, “Wow! That's incredible!”

Mark said, “I'm sure you can understand, Beth doesn't talk about this and doesn't want her story spread around. I know I can count on your confidentiality.”

Blake said, “Yeah, absolutely. I am still blown away that Beth went through this as a child and yet to talk to her, you would never know that she has had anything other than a regular life. I would so expect her to have a bunch of issues, even as an adult.”

“The only signs of her issues are that she occasionally has terrible nightmares and the fact that she can't have any children,” Mark said. “and you know why she says she can't have any children? She says that Jesus so thoroughly healed her, that her lack of kids is her daily reminder of His healing. She says that if she had kids, she could easily forget all about her history and the miracle of Jesus' healing. As it is, she sees her lack of children, and thanks Jesus every day for what He has done for her.”

Blake said, “That is the most incredible story. Tell Beth that I greatly appreciate her choosing to have you share the story with me. Would it be appropriate for me to call her and thank her myself or just to have you thank her for me?”

Mark answered, "I'm not sure. In the years that we have been married, she has never shared her full story with anybody before. She's really shy about it, I think she had some experiences with people getting very weird about it. As I think about it, I think she would be uncomfortable with even a phone call, but a note or email might be good."

Blake said, "OK, I'll do that", and got out his phone to send an email.

Mark said, "Alright then, let's get on the road."

Their conversation on the drive to Morgantown remained light, as they talked about cell phones and recent news events. Blake navigated Mark to the address without any problems. When they reached their destination, they found a simple ranch-style home in a middle-class neighborhood.

Mark asked Blake, "On the top of that paper is the guy's name, Nick something, what was it again?"

Blake checked the paper and answered, "Nick Sorenson."

Mark said, "Alright then, let's go buy some coins from Mr. Nick"

They went to the front door and rang the bell. The door was answered by a slender, blond-haired woman of maybe 30 years old.

She said, "Hello?"

Mark said, "Hi, I'm looking for Nick Sorenson."

She asks, "Are you Mark?"

"Yes, I'm Mark Harman and this is my friend, Blake Jacobs."

She replied, "OK, well good, come on in, I'm Nicole Sorenson, most people call me Nikki. For the purposes of online trading, I find that calling myself Nick reduces certain problems. Please forgive me for this minor deception."

Mark laughed and said, "You sure had me fooled, but I can certainly understand."

Nikki said, "Well, I've got your coins out on the kitchen table. Come this way."

She led them through a tidy compact home that did not show any obvious evidence of children or masculine influence. They went to the kitchen and Mark went straight for the plastic sheet holding old quarters. He pulled out a magnifier and began examining the coins.

"These are very nice indeed. Are you sure you asked enough for them?"

Nikki said, "I'm not really trying to make money off of them, I mostly want to see them go to somebody who will appreciate them."

Mark said, "That's unusual. If you don't mind me asking, if you don't collect, how did you wind up with them?"

Nikki answered, "My husband was an avid coin collector. He died in a car accident 5 years ago next month. Bit by bit, I have been selling his collection. He wouldn't have wanted them to just sit in a closet."

Mark said, "I am sorry. If these coins are representative, then it looks like he had a wonderful collection. Blake, here, lost his wife just a few weeks ago."

Nikki turned to Blake, "I am so very sorry. I have SO been where you are now and I know how rough it can be."

Blake murmured a, "Thanks. It has been rough."

Nikki and Mark completed their transaction to the satisfaction of both. Then Nikki addressed Blake again and said, "Listen Blake, if you would let me, I would like to do a couple of things for you. I don't know how you feel about such things, but I would

like to have your permission to pray for you. I know that prayer makes a difference and that Jesus provides real comfort.”

Blake said, “All prayers are appreciated. Thank you.”

Mark said, “There are many prayers being lifted up for Blake.”

Nikki continued, “And also, I know how there just aren't very many younger folks that lose their spouses and it is easy to feel like nobody can relate to what you are going through. If you want to talk to somebody else that has been there and who has experienced the pain, then I am willing. Let me give you my number. Call me anytime, day or night.”

She pulled out a piece of paper and began writing.

Blake said, “I appreciate the offer.”

As Nikki hands him the paper, she said, “It does feel a bit awkward handing a guy I hardly know my number and telling him to call me anytime. Under different circumstances it would be quite inappropriate, but this is different. This is nothing romantic, it just happens that you are traveling down a terrible road where I have already traveled. Maybe I can help navigate.”

She continued, “Blake, hang on to the fact that you will see her again in heaven. That is the only way I survived.”

Blake thanked her again. He and Mark made their goodbyes and went back to the car. In the time they had been inside Nikki's house, the weather had begun to feel like a storm was rapidly approaching. As the car began to move, the first splats of heavy raindrops were hitting the windshield. Moments later it was pouring down rain. As the weather turned dark and dreary, so did Blake's mood.

Mark made a couple of attempts at conversation, but Blake wasn't picking up his end. They traveled in silence for a bit.

Suddenly Blake burst out with what he was thinking, “What if I can't see Elaine in heaven? What if I'm not good enough for God to let me go to heaven?”

Mark responded with, “I don't think that's something you need to worry about, but let's look at it closely. Tell me about your concerns.”

Blake said, “I don't know...it's just...Elaine had such a tremendous faith. It's like I don't even know her God. Then, today, I read in the Bible about how some people that even do miracles and are sure they are going to heaven are going to get turned away and...”

“OK, hold on a second,” Mark said, “What is this you read in the Bible, where did you find it?”

“It is in Matthew 7,” replied Blake.

Mark said, “My Bible is in the back seat. Can you read me what you are talking about?”

Blake got the Bible, opened it and read:

Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord!' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of My Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, didn't we prophesy in Your name, drive out demons in Your name, and do many miracles in Your name?' Then I will announce to them, 'I never knew you! Depart from Me, you lawbreakers!' 3

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After a pause, Mark said, “You know there are many places that in the Bible that affect me emotionally, but to me this is probably the saddest thing in the whole Bible. You are right, Jesus did say that there are going to be some people who consider themselves true followers of God, but they are going to be shocked by what happens when they try to enter heaven. These people that Jesus is turning away are not casual believers, they were people that prophesied, cast out demons and did miracles in His own name. This bit of Scripture is shocking in its implications, because it says that nobody should take their salvation for granted just because they have done steps 'a', 'b' and 'c'. Every one of us needs to keep pushing to increase their faith and walk more closely.”

Blake said, “Pastor David always says, 'The Bible never contradicts itself.' Doesn't this idea of people seeking Christ, but failing to be saved, contradict what the Bible says elsewhere?”

Mark answered, “The history of the world has been littered with people that have been sure they were being faithful to God, but in truth they were doing just the opposite. Consider Judas, the Pharisees, the Crusades or even Jim Jones.

“According to the Bible,” continued Mark, “we are saved through our faith. There is a world of difference between what different people will call faith. There are people that live for the devil, but are sure they are going to heaven because when they were 6 years old they sat in a Sunday School class and said a prayer of salvation along with the teacher. They are convinced that this represents saving faith even though they never think about the Lord except maybe at funerals, they are like somebody double-checking that they remembered their ticket at the airport.”

Mark asked, “Blake, I can see that this is concerning you, prior to Elaine's illness, would you have expected to go to heaven?”

Blake replied, “I don't guess I ever really thought very much about it, but yeah, sure, I guess that was my expectation.”

“And what did you base that on?”, asked Mark.

“Well, when I was in high school, I made my confession of faith and was baptized. Except in my college years, I've been pretty regular at church and I try to do the right things.”

Mark asked, “So what does it take to get into heaven?”

Blake paused, then said, “I just feel so confused right now. You tell me.”

“OK, I can do that,” said Mark, “let's start with the basics, then. John 3:16 says that 'those who believe in Him shall not perish'. So, it is necessary to believe in Jesus. What do you think it means to believe in Him?”

Blake answered, “I have heard some people talk like it is enough to believe that he was real, but I'm not really sure that's it. I guess we need to believe He is the son of God?”

Mark said, “Believing in Jesus is not like believing in the tooth fairy, it is not a matter of believing in the existence of Jesus. Although, after 2000 years, this may be a first tiny step to faith, historically it wouldn't have made any sense. Those members of the Sanhedrin that had Jesus killed, were all too aware of His existence, but I can't believe that belief wasn't enough to get them into heaven.

“Then, there comes the idea that we must believe in who he is, but think about the demons of the New Testament, James said, '...the demons also believe – and they shudder'⁴. Those demons knew all too well that Jesus is the son of God.” Mark gestured

to the Bible in Blake's lap, saying, "Blake, flip over to Luke 4. Toward the end of the chapter there is a story of Jesus casting out a demon. Read me what it says there, especially the part of what the demon says."

Blake flipped through the Bible and read, "In the synagogue was a man with an unclean demonic spirit who cried out with a loud voice, 'Leave us alone! What do you have to do with us, Jesus – Nazarene? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are – the Holy One of God!'"⁵

Mark continued, "This story is typical of many. It seems like most of the time before Jesus cast a demon out of a person, He had to silence it first, because it wanted to announce who He was. These demons knew exactly who He was and they knew His power and purpose. Do you think the demons are going to be in heaven?"

Blake was puzzled, "So, just what does 'believe in Him' mean, then?"

Mark answered, "There were years where I was mostly unsuccessful at really finding Jesus. I went down many roads of what it means to believe in him. Most of the roads came to a dead-end. I finally found Him when I realized that it isn't so much who you believe He is, as it is who you believe you are, in relation to Him."

"Say what?" Blake exclaimed.

"Let me explain" Mark said, "The Bible makes it clear that our faith in Him must be real. Here's an example, if you have real faith in a chair, you will plop down in it without any concern that it might collapse. It isn't your faith about whether the chair will stand, you can see it is doing that, instead it is your faith about whether the chair will hold you that is important. If you say the chair is strong, but still are scared to sit in it, then you don't have real faith in that chair.

"To know who Jesus is, doesn't mean a thing until we apply that knowledge of who He is to our lives. It isn't enough to believe He is our savior, until that belief causes us to act like He has rescued us from the most awful situation imaginable. It isn't enough to believe that He is our comforter, until we can accept true comfort from Him. It isn't enough that we believe He is king, until we lead a life over which He is sovereign. It isn't enough to believe that He is all-powerful, until we start living like He is bigger than our problems. It isn't enough to believe that He is Lord and Master, until we start acting like we are His slave."

Blake said, "Wow, that sure raises the bar for belief. I'll have to think about that one a bit, but I'm not sure I have that kind of faith."

Mark said, "You should think and pray about it before you make a conclusion. After all, I don't think there are any adults that have perfect faith, God continues to stretch, grow and develop our faith all through our life."

"Adults? That's an odd choice of words." said Blake.

"By the time we are adults we have been hurt, cheated, betrayed, ripped-off and lied to. Our ability to trust gets damaged. Kids, on the other hand, are so totally trusting. I guess that is why Jesus said, 'Unless you are converted and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.'⁶ Living real faith is easy for kids, but can be so difficult for us."

Blake asked, "So how much faith is required to get into heaven?"

Mark laughed and said, "I don't know. It's not like there is a ruler for measuring faith or anything. From my experience, I guess it is less important how much faith you've got, as it is how real that bit of faith is. A huge faith that is all 'show' is worthless,

but a tiny seed of real faith may be enough. After all, the Bible talks about how faith is one of the gifts of the spirit⁷ and how Jesus is the 'source and perfecter of our faith.'⁸ Our developed faith is a gift from God, it isn't something that we make happen. All we have to do is to trust him, but that requires that original seed of faith."

Blake noticed that the rain was tapering off as they drove. After a pause, he asked, "OK, I understand that faith is important, but what about those people that sin after they become a Christian?"

"That is one of the frequently confused concepts of Christianity," said Mark. "The world pictures God as sitting in heaven with a huge ledger book recording each person's sins and good deeds. Then, at judgment time, God will see if the number of good deeds offsets the quantity of bad things the individual did. If He finds that the individual is an 'essentially good person' then they will be allowed into heaven. Even though this isn't even close to what the Bible tells us, this idea of our actions 'earning' us a place in heaven still bleed over into the Church.

"When God created the world, He put a rule in place that every person that sins against Him will spend eternity separated from Him. God tells us how every person on the face of the earth has sin and how the cost of that sin is to spend eternity in hell. Doing good things does not offset the sins. God doesn't need to track how many sins we have committed, because the quantity doesn't matter⁹. If we have sinned at all (this includes everybody), then we are a sinner. The sinners are headed for hell."

As Mark exited the highway he went on, "There is only one way out of this. The one and only way to avoid this sad destiny, is to have the forgiveness of Jesus. Any person that does not have His forgiveness is going to spend eternity separated from Jesus. It is only through Jesus that we can have salvation."

"To understand this salvation process, we must recognize that Jesus' salvation comes only through grace. It says in Ephesians, 'For by grace you are saved through faith; and this is not from yourselves, it is God's gift – not from works, so no one can boast.'¹⁰ There is nothing that we can do to earn salvation. When the Bible says it is not from works, that means that our actions have zero effect on whether we are forgiven or not. The person that is a murderer may be saved and the person that leads a near perfect life may not, both are sinners.

"From the Bible, we remember a group of people that was highly dedicated to pleasing God with their every action. They were known all over for their relentless effort to lead a life that was faultless. They made sure that their every action was in line with the Scripture. The 23rd chapter of Matthew is full of Jesus tearing into these people, the scribes and Pharisees. If I remember right He said, 'You are like whitewashed tombs, which appear beautiful on the outside, but inside are full of dead men's bones and every impurity. In the same way, on the outside you seem righteous to people, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.'¹¹ If God was impressed by following rules, then Jesus would have been pleased with the Pharisees who dedicated their lives to following the rules."

Mark went on, "At no point does salvation, or God's love, depend on our actions. Nobody can be 'good enough', or even 'too bad' to earn salvation, it is a gift given in spite of our inherent badness. Acting the part of a 'perfect Christian' may fool the people around you, but it does nothing toward helping you get to heaven."

“You see, faith is the foundation on which all aspects of Christianity are built. Faith is the one, single thing that we are responsible for. With, and through, our faith God takes care of everything else. When we have a real faith that allows God to be God in our lives, then God gives us forgiveness. All we have to do is believe. This is the essence of God's grace.”

Blake asked, “I understand that when a person first comes to Jesus he gets God's forgiveness, but what about after that? What about the person that still has sin after becoming a Christian?”

Mark said, “Satan loves to heap guilt on the Christian and tell them that they aren't good enough for God's love because of their actions. The truth of the matter is that God's grace does not end. God will not perfect us until we get to heaven. Until then, every one of us is going to have to deal with temptation and sinful thoughts and actions.”

Mark continued, “But, remember how every person that comes to the Lord with faith will receive forgiveness? That is still the rule, that hasn't changed. God is still God and we are still imperfect. His grace still rests on us because He loves us.”

Blake asked, “So you really meant it when you said our actions don't matter. Why does the Bible, and why do preachers, spend so much time telling us what we should and shouldn't do if our actions don't matter?”

Mark paused a moment, collecting his thoughts, and then continued, “There is no sinful action that can directly cause a person of real faith to lose their salvation, but our actions can affect our faith. When our actions are faithful and pleasing to God, then we are feeding our faith. On the other hand, when we make bad choices, knowing they are contrary to our faith, then we weaken our faith.

“An easy example of what I mean would be the recovering alcoholic that comes to faith. While he is 'on the wagon' then he can focus on the Lord and allow Him to rule in his life. He has applied faith. If he starts drinking again, then he has to turn away from his faith to drink – nobody can simultaneously hold in their mind that God rules their life while they sin. So, he would start to segment off parts of his life: these are God's parts and these others are my parts. He would begin the process of chopping up his faith. Sin has a way of getting bigger and bigger. As it grows, faith has to decline.”

Blake asked, “It almost sounds like you are saying that the Christian can get away with anything and it all falls under God's forgiveness. I can go live a life of murder and stealing and be forgiven?”

“The catch,” said Mark, “is that if you are living a real faith, you aren't going to desire that life. There is a huge amount of controversy about whether a person can lose their salvation. There are scriptures that make it sound like you can and scriptures that make it sound like you can't. I just wouldn't want to face Jesus after living the faithless life that is lived by some people calling themselves Christians.”

Blake thought for a moment and asked, “That scripture I read, it spoke of people being surprised by Jesus not allowing them to come into heaven, how could that be? The surprise part, it seems like people would know.”

Mark stopped at a light and said, “We live in a world that is all wrapped up in making people happy. Even in many of our churches, they focus on the 'feel good' scriptures. So many churches would rather have services full of people than to teach the truth that might make people uncomfortable. People don't read their Bibles to find out

the truth for themselves. So, many people don't really know what being a Christian is about. When they go to church all they hear is teaching about how loving God is.

"I guess this is all according to a plan of Satan. If he convinces people that they have already done everything that they need to do to enter heaven and now they can lead any sort of life they want, then they won't pursue the real Christ. He knows that there is real power for God's kingdom in a single person with true, applied faith. He fears that. This way he keeps people happy and he never has to worry about them using Christ's power against him."

As Mark spoke these words, he pulled his car into the parking lot of Blake's apartment building.

He said, "I sure appreciate you coming with me today. Am I going to see you at church tonight?"

As Blake opened his car door, he said, "Thanks for making me go, it was much more enjoyable than I expected. I don't really know if I'm going tonight or not."

The two men said their goodbyes and Blake went into his apartment. He felt a little hungry, but couldn't find anything that sounded right in his kitchen. He turned on his TV and didn't find anything he wanted to watch. He checked his email, but found nothing but junk.

He realized that it was getting late enough that he would have to decide if he was going to the Sunday night services. Elaine liked the smaller group that attended the evening service, especially when they had something they were praying hard about. She would come out of one of those extended periods of prayer so exhilarated.

As Blake lay on the couch thinking about whether he should go to church, he fell asleep.

CHAPTER 6

"For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord"
Romans 6:23

Blake was on his way to church, driving down the highway, suddenly his car is out of control, flipping, flying through the air. Then, it was crunching, crushing down on him. Then it all faded away. His last thought was that he would be late for services at the church.

The next thing he knew, he was being escorted by an angel. All around this angel was a powerful feeling of love. The feeling was simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar. Before long, they arrived in the presence of Jesus. Blake didn't have to be told who this was. He had thought the feeling around the angel was strong, but this was 1000 times more powerful. This feeling of love was so incredible that he could never imagine leaving it. In only one moment, he was totally addicted, there was nothing more important than Jesus. Without even being conscious of kneeling, he was on his knees before the throne of Jesus and he never wanted to be anywhere else.

Jesus spoke, "My dear Blake, while I know that this isn't what you want to hear, you cannot enter my peace. You have to go."

Blake was astounded. "Excuse me, Lord, there must be some sort of a mistake! I have been serving you since I was 15."

Jesus said, “You poor soul. While I would love to be able to tell you that this is just a mistake, I do not make mistakes. While you did perform service, your faith did not allow Me to give you My forgiveness. Without real faith there can't be any forgiveness. You have to go.”

With that word, Blake was whisked away from the precious presence of Jesus. In Blake's final glimpse of Jesus, he saw a tear leak out of the corner of Jesus' eye. For all eternity, Blake wanted nothing more than to return to the presence of Jesus.

He woke up sweaty and confused. The dream had seemed so real. He was on his couch in his apartment. The clock on the shelf said it was 2:58. It was dark outside, so it must be the middle of the night. He tried hard to focus on reality, but the images and feelings from the dream kept coming into his consciousness.

Blake turned on a light. He went to the refrigerator and got a drink. His mind kept coming back to one thought, what if he couldn't get into heaven and never saw his precious Elaine again?

Eventually, Blake turned off the lights and wandered to bed. As he settled into his bed, he prayed, “Jesus, please help me to see my Elaine again.”

Although Blake was sure he could go right back to sleep, he just tossed and turned until dawn, when he got up and started his day. The images of his dream would not leave him.

He made himself a cup of coffee. On his kitchen table was his Bible. It was still open to Matthew 7. Once again, he read the section that he knew had sparked his disturbing dream.

Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord!' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of My Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, didn't we prophesy in Your name, drive out demons in Your name, and do many miracles in Your name?' Then I will announce to them, 'I never knew you! Depart from Me, you lawbreakers!'¹²

Why were these people barred from heaven? Blake wanted to understand. He kept looking at the part that said, “didn't we prophesy in Your name, drive out demons in Your name, and do many miracles in Your name?” and thought about how he had never prophesied, driven out demons or done miracles. If these guys weren't qualified to enter heaven, then it seemed that he didn't have a chance.

He continued to read and re-read the scripture trying to unravel the mystery contained inside it. He saw Jesus was saying that the only ones that would be allowed into heaven were those that do “the will of My Father in heaven.” What does that mean? Up until yesterday, he might have said that it was referring to avoiding sin and doing good deeds instead. After Mark explained about God's grace, that explanation doesn't sound nearly as likely.

Jesus told these people, “I never knew you!” How could it be that He never knew them, they obviously knew Him? Blake was sure that Jesus knew every person, inside and out. Was this some different kind of knowing He is talking about?

Then, Jesus called the people He didn't let into heaven, “Lawbreakers”. What law had they broken? Is there some law that people can break and not know it?

There were so many questions. Blake wanted to talk to Mark, but it was Monday morning and Mark would be at work. Who else could he talk to? Who really seemed to understand the Bible? He thought about calling Pastor David, but Blake didn't really feel that close to him. Then suddenly, he knew who to call.

Blake grabbed his phone and found the number. Moments later, the person on the other end saw Blake's name on the caller ID and said, "Hello, Blake." It was the voice of Bob Ryan, Elaine's father.

"Hi Bob," Blake said, "how are you and Pat doing?"

"Well we're doing pretty OK. Pat has just been fighting depression, but she prays and gardens. Between those two therapies, she does pretty well. I am so glad we are having a pretty spring, so we can get outside and walk. It is hard to be out in the sunshine, looking at the evidence of God everywhere around us, and be sad at the same time. We sure do miss our Elaine though. How about you, how are you doing?"

"I'm OK," said Blake.

"Blake, Pat and I love you like you are our own son. We have been praying for you every day. Although we have been trying hard to give you space, there hasn't been a day since the funeral that I haven't wanted to call you. We, too, have struggled with the death of Elaine, she was our only daughter long before she was your wife. Now, let me ask you again, how are you doing?"

Blake was startled, but said, "It has been harder than I could have ever imagined. It is like I don't live in the same world as the one I lived in a few months ago. Everything that is associated with living seems so pointless without Elaine." As her name came out of his mouth, he felt tears well up in his eyes. "I just don't feel whole. It is like I died, but just haven't had the sense to lie down."

Bob asked, "I'm sorry if I sounded cross. It really is tough. Are you making any plans to go back to work?"

"I can't say I have plans, but I was considering calling my boss and scheduling my return."

"That would probably be good for you." Bob asked, "Have you done anything about her stuff in the apartment?"

Blake answered, "No, everything is still just the way she left it."

"Would you like for us to come down and help you move her clothes and things?"

"Maybe later. Right now, I don't think I could do it." Blake paused, then said, "The other day I noticed that there is a \$10 bill on the counter. The morning of Elaine's doctor appointment, while we were getting ready for work, she had asked me if I had any cash. I found I had this \$10 bill and I left it for her on the counter. She apparently forgot to pick it up. It is still sitting there. It feels like, if I move any of her stuff, then she won't come back, but if I leave it waiting for her, then she could walk in the door any minute. I guess it's a bit crazy."

"Blake, what you are going through may feel crazy, but it is perfectly normal," said Bob. "There are those people that will say, 'Get over it and move on with life', but those are people that haven't known real love. Grief over somebody you have deeply loved just isn't easy. There will come a time when you will need to do some moving on. That won't mean that you have forgotten Elaine or that you are completely healed of the hurt, it is just a recognition that the world doesn't stop because of your loss."

Blake said, "Thanks, Bob. You and Pat are wonders. Elaine was so lucky to have you guys for parents."

"Well, I know that you are the best thing that ever happened to Elaine" said Bob. "We would be happy to do anything for you. If you ever need us, we are just 5 hours away and would happily drop everything and run down there. Also, if you decide you need a change of scenery, you are always welcome to come up here."

Blake said, "I really, really appreciate it. It really is a comfort just knowing that you are available."

"So, Blake, is there anything particular that prompted this call today?"

"Yeah, there is. As I have wrestled to come to terms with this situation," said Blake, "I find myself focusing on seeing Elaine in heaven, but the more I think about that, the more I...well...the more I have doubts that I'll get there."

Bob answered, "Let me say up-front that it is perfectly normal for every Christian to have occasional doubts. So, tell me, what are your concerns?"

Blake paused for a moment as he chose his words carefully, "With Elaine, I have zero doubt that she is in heaven. She had such incredible faith, she lived her faith every day. With me...I don't know...I'm not in the same league. Comparing my faith with hers is like comparing the writing of a kindergartener with the writing of Shakespeare. Compared with Elaine, it's like I don't know Jesus at all."

Bob was slightly startled by the turn of the conversation, so he fell back into his pastoral counseling training. He said, "OK, so tell me more about what you are thinking on this."

"Well," Blake said, "there is this scripture I've been looking at in Matthew 7."

Bob said, "OK, hold on a second while I grab my Bible...OK, I've got it. Where's this verse?"

"Matthew 7:21 to...23"

Bob said, "Ah, that one." He read:

*"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS.'"*¹³

Bob asked, "So, what does that scripture say to you?"

"It sounds like there are people, faithful people, who are going to get a shock when they get to heaven. Jesus is going to find something about their life that is lacking and will deny them entry into heaven. They will be completely surprised," said Blake.

Bob said, "So you are concerned that you might be one of those people?"

"Well...I guess so."

Bob asked, "What do you feel you might be lacking that might cause you to miss out on heaven?"

Blake replied, "I'm not sure, but it just seems like I have never known Jesus the way some other people apparently know Him. As you read the verse, the part that caught

my ear was where he said, "I never knew you". I don't feel I really know Him, how can He know me? Please tell me what you think is going on in this verse."

Bob said, "You know it is risky to ask a preacher to explain a Scripture to you?"

Blake laughed, "Risk acknowledged. Please help me to understand."

Bob answered, "I do believe that there are going to be some people really surprised when they can't get into heaven. Over time, the church has cheapened Christianity. There is no longer an expectation that people will be committed to the Lord. It is somehow considered OK to be a Christian on Sunday mornings, then do whatever you want the rest of the week. I'm sorry, but that isn't how my Bible reads.

"God wants us to be totally His. This idea of a part-time Christian is disgusting to Him. Too many churches are communicating that it is OK to be a once-in-a-while Christian. This isn't God's plan and I'm not sure those people will be in heaven."

"Our role in the Kingdom of God is that of a servant. Where it says here, 'but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter', he is saying we have to be an obedient servant of God. Doing the will of God is all about being a servant or even a slave to Him. Serving Him is not an optional activity. Serving God is at the core of what it means to be Christian. When we have the faith that truly accepts that God is our Master, then we will naturally fall into the role of servant.

"In the second chapter of Philippians, God tells us how Jesus showed us what it is to be a servant, He submitted Himself completely to the will of His Father, even to the point of death on the cross. Then the chapter continues with, 'So then, my dear friends, just as you have always obeyed, not only in my presence, but now even more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God who is working in you, enabling you both to will and to act for His good purpose.'¹⁴

"Paul tells us in that chapter about how we have the responsibility to 'make our attitude that of Jesus Christ'¹⁵, in terms of fully serving God and being completely submitted to His will. He emphasizes that our very salvation is tied into our obedience to the Lord. 'Working out our salvation with fear and trembling' is a reference to how critically important this is."

Blake said, "I always thought of obedience to God more like we consider a child to be obedient. An obedient child is one that follows the rules."

Bob responded, "I think that even with a child, it is more than that. If Mom says, 'Go take out the trash.' and the child refuses, then that is almost a more important element than just following the rules. This obedience God calls for isn't an avoidance of sin, instead it is, 'to will and to act for His good purpose.' God isn't just looking for us to follow a set of rules, He wants us to be His hands, feet and mouth in this world. He wants us to live as His servant, one who participates in His plans, working toward His goals."

"So, you're saying," Blake asked, "that God will tell us to take out the trash and we need to obey?"

"Basically, yes." said Bob. "OK, let's take another approach. Just imagine that you were going to get a servant. You might get all excited about how handy it will be to have somebody to do things around your apartment. Then, your new servant starts on the job. You go over all the rules about how your household operates. From then on, the servant follows those rules perfectly, but when you say, 'Go make me a chocolate sundae' or any other instruction, he totally ignores you."

“Then I guess it is time to get a new servant.” said Blake. “Isn't that the whole idea of a servant, that he does what you want?”

Bob said, “Exactly! That is the essence of how God expects us to be a servant of Him, that we will do His will. He wants us to lead the exact life He has planned for us. This involves allowing Him to rule over every aspect of our lives and let Him be in every detail.”

Blake said, “That doesn't sound easy, to look to God for every detail.”

Bob responded, “The good news in this Scripture is that we don't have to make this happen, instead we just allow God to do the work. It says, 'For it is God who is working in you, enabling you both to will and to act for His good purpose.'¹⁶ To be obedient to the will of God for our lives is not a matter of forcing it to happen, it is a matter of surrendering our will and allowing God's will to lead us.

“The Lord Jesus came to the earth as a human to accomplish several purposes. One of those purposes was to model a life that pleases God. Jesus said, 'I am among you as the One who serves.'¹⁷ He was always seeking to serve His Father.

“The relationship Jesus had with His Father was described by God, 'Here is my servant whom I have chosen, My beloved in whom My soul delights; I will put my spirit on him.'¹⁸ Jesus was a perfect servant to His Father, one that was always obedient to God's will, under every circumstance. Remember how He spoke in the garden of Gethsemane, 'My Father! If it is possible, let this cup pass from Me. Yet not as I will, but as You will.'¹⁹ This was the perfect modeling of being a true servant, to be obedient, even to the point of death.”

Blake said, “OK, I'll accept that Jesus could rely on God for every detail of His life, He was connected to God, they are like different aspects of the same person. Right?”

“That's right, but the Bible is full of examples of regular men and women that were faithful servants of God. These people had the faith to lead a life that is obedient to God's calling. Their lives and the ways that they served the Lord are all very diverse. Being obedient to God does not mean to conform to some standard issue this-is-what-a-follower-of-God-does set of guidelines, it simply meant to obey the Lord's calling for your life.”

Bob continued, “In the Psalms, David tells us, 'For it was You who created my inward parts; You knit me together in my mother's womb. I will praise you, because I have been remarkably and wonderfully made. Your works are wonderful and I know this very well.'²⁰ We are not an accident. God made you exactly as He wanted you to be. God operates according to a plan and you are part of His plan.

“For every person on the earth, God created them with a plan of how they can contribute to His kingdom. They are created with a perfect combination of talents and capabilities, and in a time and place that would allow God to work through them to accomplish His perfect purpose. For each person, their alignment with God's purpose is their kingdom calling.”

Blake asked, “Are you saying that 'doing God's will' is about accepting God's calling?”

“That's right.”

“And you think God has a calling for every person?” asked Blake.

“Absolutely, but not every person will align themselves with God's plan, as some will totally reject God's leadership over their life. These people lack the faith to fully accept the Lord as Lord over their life. In a sense, these people do not believe in Jesus, because they do not accept the reality of Him in their life.”

“Being obedient to God's perfect plan is God's will for your life. There is no more satisfying place on earth, than being in the center of God's will. We were created for a purpose, when our lives align with that purpose, it has a unique way of feeling 'right'.”

Blake said, “I am still having trouble wrapping myself around the idea that God has a calling for all people. If everybody started following God's calling, wouldn't that give us a huge excess of preachers and missionaries?”

Bob laughed, “The calling of Moses was to free an entire people-group. Paul was called to spread the Good News to a huge population. Some of God's callings are spectacular, but not all of them. Whether we are called to share the Gospel to millions or to raise a godly child, it is of critical importance that we exactly follow God's leading for our life. When we are allowing God to choose our life-plan, then, and only then, are we pleasing to God. Doing good for God's kingdom is not the same as doing what God wants. There are lots of ideas of how we can work for the kingdom, but there is only one 'God's plan' for each person's life.

“For some people, their contribution to the kingdom might be obvious. Others might feel like their contribution is minor. The key question is not whether our contributions seems significant to us, it is whether we are doing what God wants. The Word does not say, 'those that make a big, splashy contribution are God's sons.' Instead, it simply says, 'All those led by God's Spirit are God's sons.'²¹ What God desires of us is that we live the life He wants us to live. Perhaps this is just so we can be in the right place at the right time, like Esther was.²²

“Whether any individual's specific role to play in God's master-plan is 'big', from a human perspective, or not, it isn't important. Whatever that calling might be, it is the specific part that God created you to fulfill. There is nothing more important for anybody to accomplish, than God's plan. There is also nothing that feels more 'right' or more satisfying than to be doing exactly what we were designed to do.”

Blake said, “I get it. So a person can work in fast-food, just so this is the path that God has directed him to be on.”

“That's right” said Bob, “There is a false belief that in order to satisfy God we have to be a preacher, foreign missionary or some other professional. While this may be God's plan for a few people, it isn't God's plan for all people. He needs people in all walks of life that are obedient to His Spirit.”

He continued, “For many of us that have tried living a life without the Spirit's guidance, we know how insignificant that life can be. A life that is led by 'self', with the contradictory, and frequently stupid, pushes and shoves of the world, goes off in some odd directions, but never reaches the point of doing anything really significant.

“The calling of God is a life-style. It means to live the life that aligns with God's plan. It is to walk hand-in-hand with the Lord, not going ahead, behind or off to the right or left, and also not trying to drag Him where you want to go, but remaining right with Him. It is setting your goals to be whatever God wills. This is the place where He can do the most incredible things.”

Blake said, "Bob, that is pretty heavy stuff. I never really put these things together. To be saved, we must believe. Believing is to live our belief. To live our belief that He is Lord and King is to allow Him to lead and direct our life, to be His servant by obeying our calling from God."

Bob said, "That's about the size of it. It is really quite simple; just let God be your God. So, did that answer your question?"

Blake laughed, "Well if it didn't, my head is so full of new ideas that I don't know what my question was anymore! It is always interesting to talk to you."

Bob replied, "I always enjoy talking to you. You know that if you ever think of any other questions or just want to talk about nothing at all, I am right here."

"I appreciate that."

"...And Blake, you know that after an injury, doctors try to get people moving, although the person's desire is to not want to move the injured part, since it hurts, but the docs know that gently getting back into action actually promotes healing. Where you have been hurt, you will need to get back into action as well. Give some thought to getting back to work. I have seen people that have actually hurt their own healing process by isolating themselves for too long after a death of somebody they loved."

"You always seem to know what I need," said Blake, "although I had been starting to think a bit about going back, I'm not sure when, or if, that might have translated into action. Given your little push, I think I'll call my boss today."

Bob said, "I think that's a good plan. As for knowing what you need, I don't have a clue, I just listen to the promptings of the Holy Spirit."

"Please give Pat a hug for me." said Blake.

"I'll do that. You take care. Call us anytime."

As Blake got off the phone, his head was spinning with this concept that somebody might miss out on heaven because they didn't have the faith to allow God to lead their life. While it seemed to be bordering on contradictory that, under grace, our actions don't matter to our salvation, but that we need to follow the calling that God has for us or we might miss salvation entirely. But then, this is all a matter of real faith, living your faith, letting God be God in your life.

All Blake knew was that he wanted to see his wonderful Elaine again. He was positive that she was in heaven, so he wanted to be sure that he was headed for heaven.

Blake's thoughts were milling furiously in his mind. He decided he needed to do something different. He left his apartment, headed toward his car without a clear destination in mind. As he started to unlock his car, a soft breeze blew into his face. Blake stopped and suddenly noticed it was a perfect spring day. He re-locked his car and started walking in the direction of a nearby park.

As the concepts of grace, faith, obedience and salvation continued to swim through his mind, out here in the sun, the thoughts were running at a much saner pace. Soon, he was sitting on a bench by a duck pond with lovely flowering trees spread out in front of him, enjoying the sunshine. A sense of calm flooded over him. For the first time since the hospital, Blake felt like he could really pray to God.

He closed his eyes and prayed, "My Lord, I don't know why you had to take Elaine. You know how much I loved her and how much I needed her. I feel so lost without her. Lord Jesus, I want so much to see her in heaven. Please help me to be sure of my place in heaven. Please help me to see my Elaine again. What do I need to do to

know I'm going to heaven? Oh, Lord, please help me. I'm just not sure. I'm not sure of anything, except that I need Your help.

"I'm not sure if you are listening, even now. I know that you didn't listen to my prayers in the hospital or Elaine would never have died. What's wrong with me? Why didn't you answer my prayers? What do I need to do? Have I sinned or something? Lord, forgive me! I need you.

"I just don't know. I am so confused. I feel so alone. Please take good care of my precious Elaine. Amen."

Blake opened his eyes and saw that there was a little, dark-haired girl of 4 or 5 years old staring at him from about 15 feet away. She was looking at him like he was a strange and scary animal in the zoo. He realized that he had tears running down his face and had either been praying out loud or at least muttering his prayer. She probably had every reason to be slightly afraid of him. He tried smiling at her as he wiped his face. The girl turned and ran away.

Blake thought about how his relationship with God really did need some work. He just wasn't sure how to fix it. Mark was so sure that the key to a person's relationship with God was faith. How does a person build their faith?

He continued to think about his faith as he got up and began to walk aimlessly through the park. When he and Elaine would come here it was usually on the weekends and there were a lot more people. Right now everybody was at work.

Bob said that he should go back to work, maybe he should. He debated whether he should call work now or wait. Finally he decided to go ahead and make the call. He pulled out his cell phone and dialed Jim's office number.

"Jim, this is Blake Jacobs."

"Blake, it is so good to hear from you. How are things going?"

Blake answered, "OK...well it has really been pretty rough."

"I am so sorry." Jim said, "Is there anything we can do to help?"

"Well, I was thinking of coming back to work."

"That would be great. Just last week, I was talking to Linda and she was commenting how much we could use you. We are really busy right now."

Blake paused then said, "I don't really know how I'll do. I've been a mess. I'm not really sure I'm ready, but people tell me it would probably be good for me to get back."

Jim asked, "So, what are you thinking?"

"Maybe I could come back next Monday?"

"Do you want to come back full time or do you want to work up to full-time?" asked Jim.

"Oh! I hadn't really considered anything but coming back as full-time. So, coming back as part time...hmm" Blake mulled.

"As a transition, of course. We will work with you any way that helps you get back. If you want to work half-days or just a few days a week, all those things would be options." said Jim.

"OK, Jim, how about this: what if I make plans to come back as full-time. Then, if it turns out to be a bad decision, can we revisit my work-schedule at that time?"

"Blake, I think you know that you are a valuable member of our team and every member of the leadership group knows that you are going through a really tough time.

We are all committed to getting you back in here being productive for the company. We will help you in whatever way we can.”

“Gee,” said Blake, “you make it sound like this is a good time to ask for a raise.”

Jim laughed, “It almost is. You have certainly been missed.”

“So I'll see you at 8:00 on Monday morning?” asked Blake. “Do I need to contact HR or anything?”

“I'll take care of that. If they need anything they'll contact you direct. You might want to keep an eye on your email.”

Blake thanked Jim for his help and concluded the conversation. He thought for a moment about Jim's comments about how he had been missed. He then picked up his phone and called Andy's office number.

Andy must have seen Blake's name in the caller ID, because he answered the phone with, “Blake, buddy, I hear you are coming back to work on Monday!”

Blake said, “Wow, news does travel fast!”

Andy replied, “Maybe 15 seconds before you called, I got an IM from Jim. I am thrilled. This place has been totally boring without you.”

Blake chuckled, “Well, I had certainly expected that I would be breaking news to you.”

“Remember,” said Andy, “The 'I' in IM stands for 'instant'. Around here, nothing is safe from Instant Messaging. Hey, I've got a great idea of how you can break back in, a bunch of the guys are going down to Sporty's for drinks after work. It is women's beach volleyball night. You ought to come. It'll be a blast.”

This really sounded like an awful idea to Blake. Hesitantly, he said, “Uh...no I don't think so...”

Andy said, “Oh man, I am so sorry. Dang, I can be insensitive. I'm sorry.”

Blake clarified, “No, it's all right. I'm glad you asked me. That's just not where I'm at right now. Things have been really confusing in my head, but that just doesn't sound like something I could enjoy right now. Maybe some other time, OK?”

“Well, I'm sorry I'm so insensitive. My trip I was supposed to take this week got canceled. So maybe you would like to meet for lunch one day, some place without drunken guys and beach volleyball?”

Blake said, “That sounds good. You are the guy with the schedule, so why don't you name the day?”

“Let's see,” said Andy, “Today I have an 11 o'clock meeting that might run forever. Tuesday is out. Wednesday is...good. How about lunch on Wednesday?”

They agreed to meet on Wednesday at a little hole-in-the-wall place that specializes in huge burgers.

Blake looked around him at the reflection of the flowering trees in the pond, everything looking green and idyllic, and yet he found himself feeling disturbed instead of peaceful. He was going back to work, which in many ways sounded like fun. He had plans with Andy, which was generally fun. He had heard some very encouraging words from his boss. He had several reasons for feeling better, but instead he felt...wrong.

As he sat there trying to figure out what was at the root of his change in emotional tone after making his calls, a mother and 2 young kids walked down the sidewalk, past his bench. One of the kids was the little girl that was staring at him when he was praying earlier. As she walked past, she looked at him and grabbed her mother's hand.

That was it. It was the prayer that was nagging him. He watches people pray, and listens to them talk about prayer at church and they experience something that Blake can't. Here he was, calm and relaxed, pouring his heart out to God, but where was God? He could have been speaking to a rock and gotten as much assurance that it was listening. Blake looked down at the cell phone, which was still in his hand, and said, "God, why don't you just give me your number and I'll call you. We seem to have a bad connection on this prayer thing."

With that, Blake stood up and returned to the apartment. He spent the rest of the day hanging around the apartment. Sort of trying to do a few things, but not really accomplishing much. He couldn't shake a feeling of loneliness and isolation. He felt like God was mad at him and he didn't know why.

CHAPTER 7

"It is not good for the man to be alone..." Genesis 2:18

As the end of the working day approached, Blake called Mark to see if he was available that evening.

"Well," Mark said, "I had told Beth that we would go out tonight to shop for a set of patio furniture. Would you like to come along?...or if there is something specific you need, I'm sure Beth would understand."

Blake told him to go ahead and enjoy his time with Beth. As he said it, he was thinking 'enjoy every minute with your wife, because you never know when God might choose to rip her out of your arms.'

So, there he was, alone. He needed to eat something, he was getting pretty hungry. He tried to think what he had eaten for lunch, but he couldn't remember ever eating lunch. He did not want to be in the apartment any more today, he wanted people.

He decided to go to the mall food-court for his dinner. When he arrived, he saw the mall wasn't very busy. He realized that this may be normal for a Monday evening. He purchased some Chinese food and a soft drink and sat down.

With Elaine, they would always hold hands and pray for a moment over their food. He wondered if God cared whether he prayed or not. Then, he concluded that he should pray, just because it was part of Elaine.

As he ate, he looked around the food-court. He saw a table of deaf people that were signing to one another. There was a table of high school kids where the girls wore too-short skirts and the guys looked like athletes. There was a table with a mom and six kids, although the kids appeared to be having a good time, the mom looked stressed. There were several couples ranging from their teens to their 70's. He also saw 2 other people sitting alone. Somehow, it didn't make him feel any better that he wasn't the only one sitting alone.

There was a couple sitting near him that seemed to be really enjoying each other's company. They would talk intently, and then laugh together. They didn't appear to notice that there was anybody else around them, they were absorbed in each other and only slightly distracted from that interest to eat their dinner.

It didn't take much imagination for Blake to see them as Blake and Elaine, just enjoying each other. There were so many times that He and Elaine had sat in this mall

food court, oblivious to the multitude around them. They would be in a crowd, but it was like they were alone. How he wished he could share just one more meal with his Elaine!

As Blake finished eating his food he began to wander around the mall. He saw many small groups of people having fun, just having normal lives. People would laugh over one another's jokes, they would get excited over one thing or another. Many were moving quickly, purposefully through the mall. To Blake, it looked like everybody, but him, had people and satisfying lives.

As he walked through the mall, he passed some clothing stores that Elaine would always want to visit. While he had gone into those stores without her before, it was always to find a gift for her. There certainly was no point in visiting those stores now.

As he would pass store windows, he would see the new spring fashions displayed. Occasionally he would find himself thinking, "Wouldn't Elaine look cute in that?" This thought would be followed by Blake mentally kicking himself.

Blake wandered into the Apple store. He was idly looking at the latest and greatest toys. A sales girl, whose name tag identified her as Mandy, asked him if she could help him. He noted that this was the first person that had spoken to him since he had bought his food. He asked Mandy several questions about the product in front of him. He wasn't really interested in buying anything; he was just desperate for any kind of human interaction. As he left the Apple store, he felt a bit guilty for taking up the girl's time, when he knew all along that he wasn't going to buy anything.

Next, Blake wandered into the Christian bookstore. He wondered if there might be something in here that would help him. As he went up and down, looking at titles, he recalled something Elaine would say, "There are so many 'Christian' books and so many of them are total trash. Why read what people have to say about what is in the Bible, when you can read the Bible for yourself? It's like reading travel reviews instead of traveling, it's never going to be as good. The Holy Spirit will reveal to a person what they need to know, if they simply read the Bible, being open to His leading."

Blake wandered right back out of the bookstore and out of the mall. The weather was starting to look like a storm might be coming in, this matched Blake's darkening mood. He sat in his car wondering what he should do next. He really wanted somebody to talk to. He wished it could be Elaine, she always made him feel better.

He thought of calling Mark, but he really didn't want to interfere with Mark and Beth's evening. He could call Bob, but he had just bugged Bob this morning. There is always Andy, but he knew Andy was out with the guys.

What about that gal...what was her name...oh yeah, Nicole. He wondered if he had her number with him. He looked in his billfold and found it. Blake stared at the slip of paper and wondered, did she really mean what she said, would it be OK if he called her? She lost her husband, it sure seems like she will understand what he's going through.

Blake took a deep breath and dialed the number on his cell phone. After 2 rings, he was beginning to have second thoughts, he was thinking of hanging up. Then, a female voice answered, "Hello".

Blake hadn't really thought through what he was going to say, so he stammered a bit as he said, "Hi, Nicole. Uh, I'm not sure if you remember me, but my name is Blake Jacobs, I came to your..."

Nicole interrupted, "Blake! God is simply amazing. Yes, I most certainly do remember you. In fact, even when the phone was ringing, I was praying for you. When my phone rang, I kinda thought...it...was like...probably you calling. Isn't that strange? God never fails to astonish me."

"You were really praying for me?" asked Blake.

"I was reading and the Lord...well, He interrupted what I was doing and had me pray for you." said Nicole.

Blake said, "Does that happen very often, that the Lord has you do things?"

Nicole answered, "I don't know, often enough. He mostly tells me things I should pray about, sometimes even waking me up in the middle of the night to pray for somebody. Sometimes I find out they were in a crisis and sometimes I never hear what it was all about, but my job is to be obedient."

There was a pause as Blake processed how casually she talked about God speaking to her. She went on, "He also occasionally tells me other things. He told me something I should tell you. He wanted you to know that He hasn't taken His hand off of you."

Blake didn't know why he completely believed her. He didn't know why he didn't just hang up on her as a total nut-case. He also didn't know why there were tears in his eyes. All he could manage to say, sitting in his car in the mall parking lot was, "Really? God?" and in little more than a squeak, "Me?"

"Oh, Blake" said Nicole sympathetically, "How about you let me pray with you right now?"

He managed to say, "OK."

"Lord Jesus, your child, Blake, is hurting. As I remember what it feels like, it is as if his very body and soul are ripped in half. My Jesus, You are the comfort that Blake needs, You are the source of the strength he needs, You are the fountain from which new faith can flow into him. You are everything that he needs. Lord, help him to be still and know that you are God. Jesus, help him to allow you to be God in the entirety of his life. Please Lord Jesus, love him into healing through your wonderful comfort. We give you the praise forever and ever. In your name we pray. Amen."

Somehow, Blake did feel a little better. He thanked her for praying for him.

She said, "If you don't mind, tell me what you are struggling with? What's going on inside your mind?"

"Well," answered Blake, "I really, really miss my Elaine. It seems like something is wrong with the world, not having her around. It seems that everything that happens, I want to tell her about. Everything is a reminder that she isn't here anymore."

He paused. When she didn't speak, he went on, "More than that, I really want to be sure that I am going to see her in heaven, but I'm just not sure. It just doesn't seem like God is there for me. My faith is weak and it just seems like I am too. I think it is because of some things I've done, I think He has turned his back on me."

His tears were flowing freely as he said, "I am just so terribly lonely right now. Even when I am around people, I just feel totally alone. I can't believe that I just called a near-total-stranger, because I wanted somebody, anybody, to talk to. I can't believe I am telling you all this either."

She laughed and said, "Blake, haven't you already figured this out? This is so much a God-thing. He arranged for us to meet. He laid you on my heart to pray for you.

He got you into the state where you would make that call. He wanted you to know that He hasn't forgotten you or turned his back on you: His hand is still on you!"

"Blake, you are his precious child. He will never leave you or forsake you. Ever. He loves you more than you can imagine."

Blake said, "I hear what you say, but He sure isn't very obvious about it, if it is true. He took away the one thing that made life worth living, my precious Elaine. Then, He seems to be so far away from me. When I pray, it is like talking to a rock, a rock that isn't even there."

Nicole said, "Blake, I am so sorry that things are difficult. I don't know if it will be helpful or not, but there are a couple of things that helped me after Joshua died. I had to force myself to remember that He is God. He knows what He is doing. He is active in people's lives even when they can't see Him working and He works through adversity for His greater plan. I read a lot of Old Testament during that time, so I would be reminded of His power and His perfect plan."

"I also spent a lot of time praising God. Beside the fact that we are commanded to praise Him, when we keep praising him for who He is, we can focus ourselves and combat doubts. He says He inhabits the praise of His people. When I am living a life that gives Him praise, then I am much more aware of His presence."

Blake responded, "I don't feel like I have much to be praising Him for."

Nicole said, "That's the thing, you don't have to praise Him for things, give Him praise for who He is. Praise Him for being loving, for being a God of grace, for being a God that carries out His perfect plan. Give Him praise for being compassionate, all powerful, yet merciful. Praise Him for being your source of strength, your source of hope and your source of faith. Praise God that He loves you, in spite of everything that is wrong about you. Praise Him that he is holy, pure and righteous. Give Him praise that He knows all things, has perfect wisdom and that there is no limit to what He can do."

She went on, "Even when a person is in the worst situation, they can still give God praise. It is in those very times, when a person can get the greatest benefit from giving God praise. Satan loves to take advantage of our difficulties, but he has no power in the face of praise."

Blake asked, "Praise Him, huh?"

Nicole giggled, "I know it sounds a bit crazy, but God knew what He was doing when He told us to praise Him. If you look in the Psalms, you will see many Psalms that are just solid praise. I particularly like 104 and 145, but there are lots of them in there. When I get down, I tend to spend a lot of time in the Psalms. If you aren't used to praying praise, just read the praise Psalms out loud as prayers, directing the praise to God. It always makes me feel better."

"Well I guess that might be OK," said Blake, "but I'm really not sure God is listening when I pray."

Nicole said, "There are times that I can't tell whether He is hearing my prayers, but actually praise can help here, too. When I start my prayer time off with praise, it is sort of like dialing your phone, it helps make the connection to God. Well, that's not exactly right. I don't really know how it works, I just know that it helps me know that God is listening."

"That's an interesting idea," said Blake. "Can I ask you something that has been bothering me?"

“What's that?”

“Do you have a feel for who is going to heaven and who isn't?”

“Oh my! I could certainly quote you some pat answer, but I don't really think that's what you need. Well...” Nicole thought carefully about how to answer the question and said, “I think the answer is 'not always'. I am sure that those people that have dedicated and submitted their life to the Lord are going to heaven. I am also sure that those people that shunned Christ and going to wind up in hell. The problem is that there is a wide gulf between those 2 positions.

“Personally,” Nicole continued, “I have always been struck by that verse in Revelation 2 or 3, where God says something like, 'you are neither hot or cold and I'll spew you out of my mouth.’²³ God isn't very interested in Christians that just dabble in church. I really don't think that buys a ticket to heaven.

“This isn't really something I think much about,” Nicole paused, thinking, “but there are a lot of people that are in church, many of them really good people, that just don't show much evidence of Christ in their lives. I sound so judgmental, which isn't what I mean to do. This is hard, let me try again. There are some things that the Bible says that Christ will do in the life of a believer. He will help them love and forgive. He will provide them with strength, peace, joy, hope and patience. Jesus promises he will guide His people in righteousness and in making godly decisions.

“But, when I look around the churches, I see so much hopelessness, sadness and weakness. I see people that are one crisis away from a breakdown, one wink away from marital unfaithfulness or one boat away from leaving the church. To me, this doesn't look like a life that is full of Jesus. I don't know, Blake, maybe their experience with Christ is just very different than mine, but in my life Jesus acts more like the Jesus of the Bible. We can never know the eternal destination of any other person and I know that I sure don't understand the works of God, but if I were one of those people, I would be worried.”

Nicole continued, “I once heard a preacher say that 'when Jesus moves in, He likes to redecorate'. He is God. He is holy. He loves His people. When He walks with a Christian, that Christian is blessed and it seems that they can't be the same as they were before. While Jesus doesn't make a Christian perfect, I would still expect some Christ-like-ness to be evident.

“If the reason there aren't any signs of Christ is because He isn't in there, then I'm not sure that person can have His forgiveness, no matter how much they attend church. It somehow feels wrong to suggest that these people might not be going to heaven. Am I being judgmental or holier-than-thou?” she asked.

Blake answered, “I don't think so, you are just telling me how you read the Bible and if it happens to apply to some people, then that isn't being judgmental. So, how has Christ changed you?”

“Oh, wow,” Nicole responded, “umm, I guess the biggie would have to be giving me strength. My last 5 years have been something that I could never have survived without His presence. I think I told you that my husband died in a car wreck almost 5 years ago. There were actually 2 deaths in that accident. I was driving Joshua to pick up his car at the repair shop when some kid in an SUV came through a red light. He hit us right in the passenger door. Joshua died 2 days later.”

Blake asked, “So the other driver died, too?”

“No,” Nicole said, “He didn't even have a scratch. At the time of the accident, I was 5 weeks pregnant with our first child. I lost the baby a few hours after the accident. That was the other death that was caused by the wreck.”

“Good golly, I bet you wanted to beat the snot out of that kid.” said Blake.

“I don't remember being mad at him. All my concern was with Joshua. I have some vague memory of the kid fretting around at the accident scene, he was obviously scared to death. I don't really have any clear memory of him or too much of anything from that day, but I heard later that he was a new driver.”

Blake asked, “You have spent 5 years recovering from Joshua's death?”

“Well, kinda,” said Nicole, “but life didn't get any easier after that. A year and a half later I was diagnosed with breast cancer.”

“Oh, cancer is what got my Elaine. That must have been scary.”

“I did keep wishing Joshua was there, but I wasn't really very scared. It was...well...it was like when I was a little girl and I'd get scared, I'd go to my Daddy, climb up into his lap, he would put his big arms around me and tell me, 'everything's gonna be OK, don't you fret, Daddy's gonna take care of you.' As a little girl, that always made me feel better.

“My Daddy isn't around anymore, but now I rely on God. There have been so many times when I just wanted to give up, but God always helps. I can rest in His arms and know that He is taking care of me. Not only is he more capable than my human father, but I don't ever have to come out of those comforting arms. I do not doubt that my Heavenly Father loves me and cares for me. He provides me with so much strength that, in many ways, I am no longer the person I used to be. He made it possible to make it through Joshua's death, my cancer and all the stresses of living in this broken world.

“It was only through His strength that I was able to open up a business. The Nikki that existed before I truly trusted in Christ would never have had the guts, determination or the strength to go it on my own. You would never believe how timid and fearful I used to be.”

Blake said, “That's really cool. Can I ask you one more question? Can a person really know if they are going to heaven or not?”

Nicole responded quickly, “Oh yes, absolutely...well...sort of...hmmm.” She thought for a moment and said, “It is kinda like this, when I was 16 years old, I had my first boyfriend. There was a mad flurry of new emotions, sensations and hormones kicking in. In my teen-aged way, I thought this must be real love. Of course, it was only 3 weeks later that I had declared him a jerk and the relationship ended. But, the important thing, is that I had never experienced romantic love, so I assumed that everything I was feeling must constitute real love. In the same way, when people get a small sniff of Jesus, they experience an amazing bit of him and they can do like the 16-year-old me did, and assume this must be the real thing. I experienced real love when I met Joshua and it made my 16-year-old experience seem like nothing, and furthermore I knew it was really love. When a person really walks within the lordship of Jesus, it is absolutely amazing. When you have that real relationship with Jesus, you know you are saved. At least I did anyway, I guess I can't speak for everybody's experience.”

Continuing, she said, “So I don't exactly know how to answer your question. I believe that when people are really saved, they know it. However, there are also other people that may think they have the real Jesus when they only have his shadow.”

Blake said, "A friend of mine recently referred to people as being deceived. Does that sound like the right term?"

"Probably yes," said Nicole, "it would surely benefit Satan, the great deceiver, if he could make people believe they were saved when they weren't. They wouldn't even try to do better, they wouldn't even know they were lost."

Blake asked, "When did you really get close to Jesus?"

"That was during my college years," said Nicole. "I came out of high school with some faith, but it wasn't very solid. When I first arrived at college, my faith got pushed out by all the distractions. I had a roommate my freshmen year that seemed a bit odd and we really didn't hit it off. My sophomore year I roomed with a party-buddy. During that year, my first-year roommate killed herself. I hardly knew the girl and didn't even like her much, but her death really hit home for me. I finally got involved with a campus ministry and was going to church. To the dismay of my new roommate, my party activities got seriously curbed. I found myself so hungry for Christ. I just couldn't get enough. In this time, I realized that the right relationship for me with Jesus was to let Him be in charge. I reached the point that I could sincerely give Him my whole life to use however He wants. I set aside everything I wanted and just allowed Him to take my life and use it for His kingdom."

Blake asked, "Wasn't that a little scary, just to put Him in charge? What if He wanted you to go to Africa or something?"

Nicole laughed gently, "Maybe I should have been more scared, but I knew that whatever plan He had for my life was the absolute best plan. Blake, I am convinced that the most powerful prayer in the whole world is to allow Jesus to be in charge of your whole life, taking your life where He wants. I can't say there haven't been a few stumbles along the way, but in general, from the time I made that prayer, Christ has walked right with me."

"Wow, that's pretty wild," Blake asked, "So, even with the bad turns that your life has taken, you still believe that His plan for your life was the best one?"

"I can't say I didn't wonder a few times, like when Joshua died, but I still trust Him even when I can't see the point of things. But, in His world, He is able to bring lots of good out of bad things."

Blake said, "Maybe you can trust like that, but I really can't imagine anything good ever coming out of the death of my Elaine."

"The Lord has a way of surprising us. The classic bringing good-out-of-bad story from scripture is the story of Joseph.²⁴ Who would have ever imagined any good coming out of him being sold into slavery by his jealous brothers? But, by the time God is done with Joseph, Joseph has saved his people, something that couldn't have happened if he had continued to live with his brothers. I know that He can bring good out of Elaine's death. We'll just have to wait to see what he does."

"I guess," said Blake.

Nicole said gently, "Blake, one thing that my experiences have taught me is that God doesn't want us to despair. He is hope. If we let Him be hope in our lives, then the despair goes away. He loves you, Blake, more than you can imagine."

They concluded the conversation with Nicole's invitation to call her anytime he wanted to talk. Blake looked around as he put away his cell phone and was astonished to

realize that the mall had closed while he had been talking to Nicole. The parking lot was mostly deserted.

Blake started the car and began heading home, thinking about their conversation. He hadn't been too sure about her at the beginning, but now he concluded he liked her frank manner, even if she did talk a lot.

He thought about her concept of praising God as a way to focus on the good. This was a new idea to him. Previously, when he had thought of praise, he just thought of the praise choruses they sang at church. He knew that his mind had been a battlefield of conflicting thoughts and ideas since Elaine's death. He also knew that many of the things in his head weren't healthy and beneficial. Perhaps it made sense to try praising God as a healthy substitute for the undesirable lines of thought.

He really did want to know that God was hearing his prayers. Nicole had experienced that having praise as part of prayer time, would help with that. For perhaps the hundredth time, he thought that he really needed to set aside a time in his routine for prayer and Bible. Right now his life seemed to be without any sort of routine at all. Elaine had always done her "private time" in the morning before work. Blake had tried that, but he just wasn't enough of a morning person to be dedicated to it. There always seemed to be something else that needed to be done instead.

Nicole sure was insistent that it was essential to let God be in charge of your life. Her comments on letting God lead somehow seemed different than how he had heard other people talk about the subject. She really believed that we can give our lives to God and He will tell you what you need to do with your life. Is this really essential if we want to get close to God or just even to go to heaven?

It suddenly occurred to Blake that just this morning, Bob had been talking about finding the path that God has for your life. Is God trying to tell him something? Is God trying to alert him to a calling He has for him? What might God ask him to do?

The image of himself as a pastor came into his mind and made him chuckle. This was followed immediately by a clenching of his stomach in fear. What if God really did have that in mind for him? That would be terrifying!

CHAPTER 8

*"Reveal to me the way I should go, because I long for you."
Psalm 143:8*

The next morning Blake woke with just a hint of optimism. He ate some breakfast, checked email, flipped across the channels on the TV, then found himself without anything to do. He noticed his Bible sitting on the table. He had mixed feelings about going to God. While he really wanted salvation and a closeness to God, he was scared. God didn't listen to his prayers when he prayed for Elaine. God might not listen to him now. Or maybe God will listen and draw him in to be some sort of Jesus-freak that spends his whole life in Africa working with AIDS patients.

He sat down in front of the Bible. It was still open to Matthew 7. Right there, it said, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord!' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of My Father in heaven." Blake wondered aloud, "Do I do Your will? Will I go to heaven?" He didn't really expect it, but he didn't hear an answer to his question.

He remembered how Nicole had talked about praising God. She used the Psalms for praise. He flipped back to Psalms. "There are a lot of Psalms here," he thought. "I wonder how I find the praise Psalms?" He knew that Nicole had specifically mentioned a couple of her favorite praise Psalms, but he had no recollection of which ones she had said.

He read a random line on the open page, "The Ephramite archers turned back on the day of the battle. They did not keep God's covenant..." That did not sound like praise, so he flipped a few more pages and saw the sub-title for Psalm 111, "Praise for the Lord's Works". He thought that this sounded more promising. He read aloud,

*Hallelujah! I will praise the Lord with all my heart in the assembly of the upright and in the congregation. The Lord's works are great, studied by all who delight in them. All that he does is splendid and majestic; His righteousness endured forever. He has caused His wonderful works to be remembered. The Lord is gracious and compassionate. He has provided food for those who fear Him; He remembers His covenant forever. He has shown His people the power of His works by giving them the inheritance of the nations. The works of His hands are truth and justice; all His instructions are trustworthy. They are established forever and ever, enacted in truth and uprightness. He has sent redemption to His people. He has ordained His covenant forever. His name is holy and awe-inspiring. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow His instructions have good insight. His praise endures forever.*²⁵

"Lord, are you trying to tell me something or what?" Blake said, "First you have Bob and Nicole both talk about finding your will for my life, but that scares me, so you lead me right to, 'all His instructions are trustworthy'. How do I really know whether I can really trust you when you let me down with Elaine?"

"Oh, Lord, I do miss her so very much. I do thank you for the years that we got to spend together. Without a doubt, she was the best thing that ever happened to me. When I read that scripture about the magnificence of your works, I can't help but remember the trip that Elaine and I took to the little town in the Colorado Rockies. That whole trip was filled with the glories of your creation and you gave me Elaine who just sucked it all in so she could give you praise for it.

"I especially remember our time on the red bench. Overlooking that little town and facing what must be the most beautiful mountain you ever made, Elaine and I sat on that red bench, held hands and prayed together. I have never felt closer to You."

"I know that you have so much goodness, I have seen it in Elaine. She was your child, she really delighted in you. I know that you walked with her. Oh, Lord, I want that. I want what Elaine had. I want to be close to you, but I just don't know how to do it. Help me. Help me figure out how to get close to you.

"Lord, I am sure that something has come between us or else you would have answered my prayers and healed Elaine. I can only imagine that you let her die to punish me. I don't know what I did, but I'm sorry. I ask your forgiveness in the name of Jesus. Amen."

Blake sat there for a moment wondering if God was hearing his prayers and ignoring him or if his prayers weren't reaching God at all.

His phone rang, interrupting his thoughts. It was Andy.

Andy said, "Hey bud, I have an 11:00 meeting close to your place. What do you say we grab a bite of lunch after my meeting?"

Since Andy wasn't sure exactly when his meeting would end, they agreed that Andy would give Blake a call when he was finished and they would meet at a BBQ place that was about a half mile from Blake's apartment. Blake was happy to have something on his agenda for the day.

As Blake and Andy sat waiting for their food, they caught up on the news. Then Andy asked, "So how are things with you? Are you going to be ready for the office next week?"

"Yeah, I guess" said Blake. "There are some things that I wish I could work out before I go back to the grind. This time off has given me a lot of time to think."

Andy said, "You still trying to work out some Elaine things, huh?"

"Actually," said Blake, "I am trying to work out some God things. I really, really want to be with Elaine in heaven. I'm just not sure that's where I'm going to wind up."

Andy was shocked, "Oh get real, that's nuts. Of course you are going to heaven. You are a really good person and you go to church all the time. Haven't you looked around you? This world is full of wicked, evil people, but you are honest and kind. Besides, God is love. I can't really think that he is going to kick very many people to hell, except maybe a few of the really bad people. You really don't have a thing to worry about!"

Blake said, "Hmm, well, I don't know. Let me ask you this: Do you think that God speaks to people – like to give them instructions or callings or whatever?"

"Why," Andy asked, half kidding, "have you been hearing voices talking to you?"

"No," Blake laughed, "I was just wondering."

"No, I don't think God talks to people except maybe in very rare, special circumstances and I'm not even sure about that."

He continued, "Last week I watched an old movie with Ashley. I don't guess you have met Ashley, she is my current girlfriend. Anyway, we watched Evan Almighty. It had this guy that was a modern-day senator. God came to him and told him to build an ark, like Noah. So, right there in suburban Virginia, he builds this huge boat, it was like as long as a football field. Anyway, everybody thought he was totally nuts when he claimed that God told him to do it.

"While I know this was just a dumb movie, people assume that somebody that hears from God is insane. I think it would be more socially acceptable to say, 'My Rice Krispies told me to do it' than to say, 'God told me to do it.'"

They both laughed, then Andy went on, "I guess if somebody said, 'God told me to go to Bible school and become a preacher.' and that was consistent with their character, then there might not be any eyebrows raised. But if somebody was using God as an excuse to do something really weird, then people might be thinking psychosis."

From there, the conversation wandered onto things going on at work. Blake tucked Andy's ideas into the back of his mind to think about later.

As Blake was driving back home after lunch, he began thinking about Andy's idea of, "You really don't have a thing to worry about!" when his phone rang. He saw that it was Mark calling.

Mark said, "If you don't have any plans, can you come over to the house tonight? We need to test out our new patio furniture. I've got some salmon steaks swimming in a sweet habanero marinade that will be awesome on the grill."

Blake responded, "OK, will Beth be there or will I have to put up with you alone?"

"As it turns out, having you over was Beth's idea. She was looking forward to talking to you."

"You know," Blake said, "that you and Beth treat me better than I deserve. I would love to come for dinner."

Mark said, "That's great, how's 6ish sound?"

"I'll be there. Can I bring anything?" said Blake.

"I think Beth has everything under control, she didn't mention anything, so just bring yourself."

CHAPTER 9

"My grace is sufficient for you..." 2 Corinthians 12:9

As Blake drove to Mark and Beth's he was reflecting on his last conversation with Mark. Mark had described how he saw accepting God's plan for your life as an assurance of salvation. Blake wasn't so sure. While this idea might be all well and good for a mature Christian, it didn't make any sense for a new Christian. He could just imagine the conversation between Jesus and a new Christian that had just died, "I am sorry, but you can't come into heaven because you never lived my plan for your life."

Mark's comments about faith did make sense. Blake knew people that would spout off all kinds of statements about their faith, but when the rubber-hit-the-road, their faith was useless. Maybe a sign of true faith is really whether it is applied to one's life.

That Matthew verse had said that only the people that do the will of God are going to get into heaven. Blake still wanted to cling on to the idea that this meant avoiding sin. Still, he understood what Mark had said about salvation being through grace. Salvation can't be about grace and 'being good enough' at the same time, it is either a gift given out of God's love or it is something earned.

Blake had always found grace to be a difficult concept. It was so foreign to how things work on this world, like the saying, "there's no such thing as a free lunch." It was so much closer to Blake's experiences to say that you have to earn heaven. Blake's uncle Tony used to say, "If you want the good things in life, you have to work for them."

As he remembered what his uncle would say, he thought about "the good things in life." For him, all the other good things paled in comparison to Elaine, but he hadn't worked to get Elaine. She had just fallen into his life. He hadn't deserved her. He hadn't earned her. She was like a gift given to him for no reason...or maybe she was a gift given by God out of love!

Perhaps that is how God's grace works. Even though we don't deserve it, He reaches out and offers us salvation. All we have to do is accept it – accept Him – and salvation is ours! This was beginning to make sense.

He pulled his car up in front of Mark and Beth's home. Although Blake was pretty sure that Mark made very good money on his job, you would never know it by

looking at how they live. Mark lived in a modest, middle-class, suburban neighborhood, but Blake really thought they could probably afford to live in a much classier area.

As Blake got out of the car, he thought about a couple of times when he had seen Mark deal with pretentious, snooty people. While Mark had remained polite, he had also made it clear that he wasn't going to play that game. Pretentious and snooty are not terms to describe Mark or Beth. Mark never appeared to have much patience for it. Perhaps that was why they live here instead of a fancy neighborhood.

Mark and Beth greeted Blake with an enthusiastic welcome. They had a wonderful meal. The salmon was every bit as good as advertised by Mark. Throughout the meal, the conversation had flowed pleasantly.

They all sat back, comfortably stuffed after the wonderful meal. Beth broke the brief pause in conversation, by asking Blake, "Blake, Mark tells me that you were asking some questions about God and salvation. Did you get everything figured out?"

Blake replied, "I wish! Well, I have been asking questions of many church-going people recently. It is interesting how many different answers I get. By the way, Mark, I called that gal you bought the coins from."

"Nikki?," said Mark. "Did you really? What was she like?"

"Oh, darn," Blake exclaimed, "she did want to be called Nikki, I kept calling her Nicole. Anyway, she's a little flaky, but I like her. She prayed with me on the phone and talked to me about praising God. We also had a discussion about if people know whether they are saved or not. It was interesting. On the subject of God, she talks a lot."

Beth asked, "What did you conclude about whether people know whether they are saved or not?"

"Nicole...Nikki, said that she felt there were many people that were deceived. That when they got the tiniest sniff of Jesus, that they would conclude, 'Oh, this must be what salvation feels like.' She gave the example of how she thought her first boyfriend must be a real love, because of the new feelings she experienced. She thought that there were a lot of people that never allow Jesus to come in, because they were satisfied just smelling him from a distance, but this might not be adequate for salvation."

Blake went on, "I think I am making a mess of her explanation. It made more sense when she said it."

"I followed you, it sounds reasonable," said Mark.

"She also told me about a tragedy in her college years that caused her to get serious about the Lord. She said that God took bad events and made good come out of them."

Beth said, "I have certainly experienced that. So, you have talked to Mark and you have talked to Nikki about your concerns. Do you have any peace about these issues yet?"

Blake responded, "I don't know. Sometimes things seem to make sense and sometimes they are like tidbits of information written on slips of paper swirling around in a whirlwind. I don't know why God has to be so complicated."

"Oh goodness," said Beth. "usually when God is confusing, it just means that we are making it too complicated."

Mark nodded and said, "There is a lot of information about God, just look how long the Bible is, but the parts we need boil down to some pretty simple concepts. The problem is, many of those concepts are foreign to the human mind. We want so badly for

God to fit into some human mold, so we can grasp him, but that just isn't God. While we want God to act on A and B and therefore do C, He is managing a universe and dealing with A, B, C, D, on out to infinity. We can't even imagine what he deals with, but as a result of these things, He doesn't act like a human. This all beside the simple fact that He just isn't human, He is the creator of all humans."

"Let me give you an example," said Beth, "people have heard enough times that God loves them. So, they expect that when they ask for something that God should give it to them, after all if He loves them, shouldn't He be concerned with their happiness? In truth, He does love them, He also knows what is best for His children."

Mark jumped in with, "A loving parent will say 'no' to things that aren't going to be good for their children, even if the kids really want them. To the child, playing ball in the street might sound like a lot of fun, but the parent recognizes the risk involved."

Beth added, "And sometimes the parent makes a decision that make the child unhappy because the parents see a bigger picture. The child may cry, 'Please Mommy, don't make us move, I don't want to live someplace else!', but the mom may know that there are financial issues, beyond the child's grasp, that are forcing the move."

Mark finished the thought, "When we see God acting like a loving parent, watching out for our needs, even when that makes us unhappy..."

Beth interrupted, "or making decisions that are for the best, but are based on concepts that are beyond us, then we find God confusing. So many people think Romans 8:28 is a blank check for anything they want."

"Which one is Romans 8:28?"

Beth said, "I'm sorry, that's 'We know that all things work together for the good of those who love God: those who are called according to His purpose.'"

Mark continued for her, "We will never understand God. We aren't capable of understanding Him. How could we ever understand the one who created us? It is like expecting the potato to understand the mind of the farmer that planted it? It just isn't going to happen. So, it all comes down to trust."

Beth said, "When we can't understand God, which is really all the time, we have only 2 choices, we can reject him or we can trust him. Trusting Him isn't always easy, there are times that it feels like walking across the highway blindfolded, but He always works things out."

Mark said, "There are times when it might not feel like it, but He really is in control. There will always be those people that will say, 'a loving God wouldn't let this or that happen', but we have to trust that He has a purpose to everything."

Beth finished his thought, "Even when we can't see it or even imagine it. If we really believe He is God, then we must let Him be God."

Then Mark said, "And as we talked about the other day, if your faith doesn't really apply to your daily walk, then your faith may not be real. Really trusting God is a big part of real faith, especially in those hard-to-understand times."

Blake said with his voice breaking, "You know that I prayed for E-Elaine to be healed. He took her anyway. It is so hard for me to trust Him."

"We prayed for her healing, too," said Beth. "We don't know why He brought her home, either. There are many other times when we have prayed for things only to have them not answered the way we might have liked."

Mark said, "When we are looking at prayers that were not answered the way we wanted, we must trust Him. We have to assume that He knows what He is doing."

Beth added, "We have seen prayers that we prayed earnestly, but weren't answered the way we wanted, yet when we looked back years later we realized that God absolutely knew what He was doing. There was a job opportunity that Mark had, but in spite of our prayers, he didn't get the job. The job seemed so perfect to us. A year later, most of the management team was under indictment. We were so grateful that Mark didn't go work for them. It was a mess. God knew what that position held, even when we didn't."

"We don't always figure out why God didn't answer our prayers," said Mark, "but we see the reason why often enough to help us trust him even when things don't go the way we wanted. We have to trust that He is God and that He has everything under control."

Blake said, "I really want to get closer to God, but it seems like nothing I do makes any difference."

Beth spoke gently, "When it comes to God, 'doing' is overrated. Many times when your soul is uneasy, the best verse to remember is 'Be still and know that I am God'²⁶. So let me ask you, what is your prayer life like?"

"Well, I don't guess it is very good," replied Blake, "I am kind of haphazard about my prayer time, especially since Elaine got sick. In the past, I have tried to get on a regular routine, but something always got in the way."

Beth asked, "So, what do your prayers usually consist of?"

"I don't know," replied Blake, "I guess I just pray about what is on my mind. The other day that Nikki girl turned me on to praying a Psalm, that was an interesting experience."

"So what have you been praying about recently?" asked Beth.

"Mostly about why God seems so distant."

Beth and Mark exchanged a glance and Mark said, "I think I know where Beth is going with this line of questions. I think I told you that there was a time when I was spiritually where you are now. I wanted God but couldn't find Him. There were a couple of things that I did that began to crack the barrier I had built up between myself and God.

"First, I think that Miss Nikki was on a good track. When I was failing to find God, I was absorbed with all my sin and why made God turned His back on me. In short, I was focused on myself and my problems. I slowly, very slowly, came to realize that where my focus must be, is on Him. A Scripture that was so key for me and this transition comes from the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus told His listeners not to worry about their needs, but instead to trust God and, 'seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will be provided for you'²⁷. This scripture told me that the answer to our broken relationship wouldn't be found through asking God 'why?', but instead through just seeking His face as if there wasn't a problem.

"I came to realize that I was only seeking Him to talk about me and my needs. He isn't my slave, whose purpose is to make me happy. Instead, His is God, the king of the universe. I learned that I had to treat Him like He is God and everything else will follow from there. I, too, learned to praise the Lord. When I lifted Him up, then He lifted me up.

“The second thing that I did, was to start getting regular about spending time with Him and in His word. Like you, I had tried and failed so many times to develop a habit of private time with God. Finally, the Lord gave me 2 valuable thoughts: First, if I really want a real relationship, then I had to pay the price. The price I needed to pay was to make myself spend time every day. The second thought was that, for me, I had to get away from the temptations of home in order to be alone with Him. Around the house, there were always other things that needed my attention. I always found myself planning on getting to my prayer time right after I do this, that and something else.”

Mark continued, “While this might not be important for anybody else, for me to get started with spending daily time with God, I had to get away from the house. I started spending my time with God in the car before work, where there were no distractions and temptations to be doing other things.

“About this same time, I picked up a pocket New Testament. I started reading with Matthew and read all the way through to Revelation. Although I had read most of the New Testament before, by reading a chapter here and a chapter there, I had never read it front to back. It really served to open my eyes about Jesus, even though I was already sure I knew Him.”

Blake asked, “So, did you set a goal of reading some specific number of chapters a day or something?”

Mark laughed, “No, not at all! My goal was to let God speak through the Scriptures. Any time a verse would catch my attention or confuse me, I would stop and pray about it. I wouldn't move on until I had some sense of peace about it or gave up trying. There were days that I never made it through a chapter and other days when I would plow through many chapters.”

Blake commented, “That's interesting.”

Beth said, “God gave us the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit because He wants to be active in our lives. God speaks to us if we will listen. He knows what we need and when we need it. He leads and guides our growth.”

Blake commented, “I don't think that God has ever spoken to me.”

Beth laughed and said, “I bet He has and you just didn't know it was Him. Scripture says, ‘For God speaks time and again, but a person may not notice it.’²⁸ Have you ever had a hunch that turned out to be exactly ‘on the mark’ or arbitrarily changed a routine and wound up avoiding a problem? Have you ever met somebody and immediately felt like you wanted to get to know them better or that you ought to avoid them? Many times when God speaks to us we don't know it is Him.”

“Do you think that God guided the way that I met Elaine?” asked Blake.

Beth said, “I would almost guarantee that He played a part in that.”

“Really?” said Blake, “I wasn't much of a Christian then. Do you really think God might have been guiding my life, even then?”

“Absolutely!” said Mark, “God loves all His people, not just those that know Him. Think about Saul of Tarsus, who was going out and throwing Christians in jail or killing them. God had a plan for Him, just like He has a plan for you. He reached out to help guide Saul to Himself. He gave you Elaine and she helped you learn more about what it really means to walk with Him.”

Beth said, “And don't think that He is done with you. He still has a plan for you. He still is speaking and guiding you. As you align yourself more with the Lord, His

guidance becomes more obvious. As you reach the point of starting to seek His guidance on how you can serve Him, then the really amazing things start to happen.”

“What do you mean, 'amazing things'?” asked Blake.

Mark and Beth exchanged a glance and the opportunity to answer fell on Mark. “It's like this: Imagine if you were asked to do something for the president. What he has asked you to do is something that is important to him and he is willing to provide his influence and resources to get it done. As you try to accomplish his errand, doors will be opened and roadblocks will collapse, because you carry the president's authority. When a person serves the Lord, doing what the Lord wants, for God's purpose, then they work with His authority and power.”

Beth finished, “This is God, He holds all power. Nothing is impossible for Him. He has a perfect plan for His people. Mark's example of the president's power is easier to relate to, but really the president is as powerful as a soap-dish in comparison with God Almighty.”

Blake laughed, “I bet some presidents would chafe at having their power compared to a soap-dish.”

“Perhaps,” said Beth, “But if they really know my God, then they would know it is true.”

Blake said, “It is interesting to think that God might have a plan for me, that He might actually use me for something. What do you think that might be?”

Mark replied, “Who knows the mind of God? One thing is for certain, God doesn't think like we do. God's plan is virtually never what we would choose for ourselves. There are a lot of people that have surrendered dreams to serve God, but when all is said and done, they never have regrets about following God's plan. You may hear of young people that give up their dreams to follow their parent's plan and end up with lots of regrets, but God is different, He has perfect wisdom.”

“For some people,” said Beth, “they know God's plan from childhood, but for most of us we have to spend a lot of time on our knees, listening hard, to come to an understanding of what He wants from us. It can take a lot of listening, a lot of prayers and a lot of trusting.”

“That's where I have the most trouble,” said Blake, “the trusting. Elaine was so precious to me and now she is gone and I am alone.” He felt tears form in his eyes, but refused to give in to them.

Mark said, “That is perfectly understandable. So many things happen to us that seem senseless. Trusting Him can be an incredibly tough thing. But look at it this way, if you meet a new friend, you don't immediately tell him, 'Here's my credit card if you need anything, just help yourself' or tell him your deepest secret. Trust starts as a small seed and grows from that, as you see the person being trustworthy.

“Trusting God works the same way. You will find small ways that you can trust God, even though you have been hurt. You will find that He is faithful and your trust will grow. The odd thing about trusting God is that it is a bit like chasing a rainbow. You know how the closer you get to a rainbow, the more it appears to move away? Just about the time you think you have completely trusted God, He reveals more ways in which you can trust Him. While you are struggling with trusting God, it may surprise you that I am, too. I may be struggling with trusting Him in different ways and areas, but it is the same lifelong struggle.”

Beth said, "You don't know how often my prayers over some big concern, have concluded with Him asking, 'Don't you trust Me?'" She smiled as she said, "Sometimes I feel like such an idiot when He does that."

Blake smiled weakly for a moment, then turned serious, "This whole trust thing is a real sticking point for me. Some of Elaine's last words to me were that Jesus would be ready to give me comfort in the coming days, all I would have to do is let Him. I just don't know if I can trust Him enough to let Him do anything for me."

Mark answered softly, "With what you have been through, that isn't surprising. Is this really a trust issue or are you just angry at Him?"

"Maybe some of that, too," said Blake, "I don't know. There are so many emotions swirled together. I know that I really want the Lord, I want His comfort, I want to go to heaven to be with Elaine, but at the same time I don't want anything to do with Him. I know that sounds crazy."

"Blake," Blake looked up at Beth as she continued tenderly, "there have been times in my life when I got really mad at God. The problem is that His love for us never stops. We feel that love drawing us and when we are angry it just aggravates. We want Him to act like a human and withdrawal His love when we lash out at Him, but He is God. His love endures forever. The Bible says, 'neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing will have the power to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord!'²⁹ So there we are being mad at Him, and there He is loving us. It makes a big conflict in us, because we are drawn by His love, but we are also angry."

"Hmm," Blake thought about her idea, "that is kind of how it is. Maybe it is His love drawing me that makes me feel so torn. So what do you do about it?"

Beth smiled as she said, "I usually go on being mad for a little while, but He always wins. His love always overcomes my anger in the end. Have a conversation with Him about how you feel. He already knows what is in your thoughts, so it's not like you are hiding it from Him. Go ahead and put all your thoughts and fears on the table and give Him a chance to respond."

"Really?" said Blake somewhat surprised, "Just lay it out there and exactly what sort of response can I expect, lightning striking me dead?"

"I think," Mark replied, "that being honest with God is always OK. I know I have given him a piece of my mind a few times and he hasn't struck me dead yet. Look at it this way. He made you. As Beth said, He already knows what is in your heart and mind, but that doesn't stop Him from loving you. He just wants a chance to respond to your feelings."

Beth said, "He has things He wants to be able to do for you, but He can't, or won't, do them while you are shutting Him out."

"I'm not sure I really want Him 'doing' for me," said Blake.

Mark said, "You sound like Peter when Jesus tried to wash his feet. He told Jesus that there was no way he was going to allow Him to wash his feet. Jesus basically said, 'If you want to have a relationship with me, then you have to allow me to serve you.' I think that if we block God from working in our lives, then that is a type of pride. It says, 'I don't need you.' God really doesn't like pride."

With a little scolding in her voice, Beth said, "Mark!"

Mark apologized, "Oh, I'm sorry if that seemed a little harsh, but pride is something I struggle with. I, too, sometimes have trouble letting the Lord do things for me. Just like Peter, I'm OK with serving Him, but it takes an entirely different form of submission to let Him bless us."

There was a brief pause in the conversation, then Blake asked, "So, the other day I was talking to my father-in-law about God's calling. He really feels like it is extremely important to your spiritual life to follow His will in the form of finding and conforming to His calling for your life. Do you guys feel like you have done that?"

Beth answered first, saying, "Absolutely. I really feel like the Lord put me in my job at the University, just so I could be available to those young ladies that God has come into my office. I feel like I am able to serve the Lord through my counseling."

Mark said, "In my case, I had always worked in sales, for the last decade I've been selling medical equipment. I used to pray to God to reveal His divine calling. I was very slow to realize that it was right in front of me. God gave me a gift of being able to talk to people. They trust me and they open up to me. God has given me an incredible gift and He expected me to use it for Him. When I realized that this was my calling and embraced it as such, then He was really able to work through me. In the mornings, I pray for those people I will meet that day. Frequently God gives me Scripture verses I will need to give people that day. On a couple of occasions, I have even dreamed about individuals that I am about to meet and then I came into that encounter with special insights provided in advance by God."

Blake said, "Oh, that's interesting. I guess I had the idea that God's calling was always going to be like an occupation."

"No, I don't believe so." Mark replied, "Although I used to believe the same thing. I believe I could change careers completely and still be fulfilling my calling, just so it is something that involves working with lots of people. Sometimes I think it is our pride that wants us doing something big and spectacular for the Lord, but that is only rarely what He is looking for. For most of us, our calling is something much more subdued, but with God's power it can be no less effective."

Blake looked at his phone, "Look how late it is, and you guys have to work tomorrow. Please forgive me for not going home at a more reasonable hour."

Beth and Mark both assured him that if they could help him have some peace, that there is nothing more important they could be doing.

Blake thanked them for the delicious dinner and the good conversation. Mark and Beth walked him to the door and out onto their tiny front porch to say good bye.

Beth hugged Blake, saying, "I'm praying that God will perform a powerful work in you." She stepped back so Mark could make his good byes. As she did so, her shoe caught on the welcome mat. Suddenly, she was toppling off of the porch. Both men gasped as they saw her fall, unable to do anything about it. She fell down, trying to catch herself, but her head hit hard on the concrete.

Mark jumped down and found her limp on the ground. He called her name, but she didn't answer. A pool of blood was spreading out from her head. Mark kept frantically calling to her, but was afraid to move her. Blake grabbed his phone and called 911.

CHAPTER 10

"This hope does not disappoint..." Romans 5:5

Hours later, Blake sat in the waiting room at the hospital. This was the same hospital that Elaine had come to. He found himself terrified. He just kept having visions of Elaine's dead body in her hospital bed with Beth's face superimposed over Elaine's. He had been told that they were just waiting to see if Beth would wake. The sooner she awakens, the better her chances for a good recovery would be.

Blake felt like he was going to explode if he had to sit there one more minute. He got up to go to the men's room, thinking he would splash some water on his face. As he approached the men's room he saw that it was closed for cleaning. He thought, "Who cleans the restrooms at three in the morning?" Then he went in search of another restroom.

He followed the sign out of the ER area and into the main hospital hall. Before he came to a restroom, he came to a glass door labeled, "chapel". Beyond that door, he could see an area that looked like a tiny church. In spite of the many days that he had spent in this hospital, he had never noticed this chapel area before.

On a whim, he checked the door to see if it was unlocked. The door opened easily and he found himself standing in the chapel. He looked around the room and it was obvious that he was alone. He said, "Anybody home?" and got no response. He felt simultaneously like he was intruding into some place he wasn't supposed to be and that he was really supposed to be there.

His eye was drawn to a big wooden cross at the front of the room. He thought to himself, "This is a good place to pray for Beth. Without taking his eyes off of the cross, he settled into a nearby chair. As he prepared to pray, he glanced down. He saw that the chair in front of his had a flip-down step for kneeling on. This really seemed like a good idea, so he knelt.

Blake prayed, "Oh, Lord God, please. Please help Beth. Lord, I know I'm not really worthy of asking you anything, but she really needs your help right now. I know that you are the awesome, wonderful and powerful God. I know that you are able to heal her and I know that you love her. Oh, Lord, I ask that you reach down from heaven and give her your healing."

He continued praying, both seeking the Lord for Beth and also enjoying the sensation of the presence of the Lord. In time, he noticed that his prayer had changed. He found himself praying, "I thank you so much for your healing hand. I thank you for the miracle you have done in Beth's life. You are such a good God, I give you praise. Amen."

Blake opened his eyes and realized that he needed to see Beth and Mark. He got up with the firm knowledge that he and God had spoken together. He was also certain that Beth was going to be OK. As he left the chapel, he made half an attempt to clean the tears off of his face. He hurried back to the ER.

As he walked back into the ER waiting room, the reception clerk called out his name. She told him, "Yes, you can go back to room 17."

He hurried back and found Beth on the gurney. She smiled when she saw him come in. Blake was so happy to see her conscious. His tears started flowing as he took her hand. From across the bed, Mark said, "It looks like she's going to be fine!"

"I was so worried and now I couldn't be happier. God does answer prayers!" said Blake.

Beth said to Blake, "So, why are you crying?"

"I am just overwhelmed," said Blake. "I was so afraid that I was going to lose you too, but God heard my prayers. He really heard me, and there you are looking perfectly healthy. How are you feeling?"

Beth answered, "I feel great."

Mark spoke, "The doctor was just in here and said he didn't understand why she was doing so well, but she appears to be 100%, unlike how she was when she arrived. I told him it was a miracle of God."

"What did he say to that?" asked Blake.

"He said, 'Maybe it is'," answered Mark. Turning to Beth, he said, "Do you want to tell him about your vision?"

Beth said, "Well, I don't really know what it was. While I was out, I...well...dreamed?...I don't know. Anyway, I was off in a dark place and I couldn't see to find my way back. It seemed like I was there a really long time. And then, a tunnel opened up in the blackness and I felt prayers being lifted up for me. I felt Jesus' presence in the tunnel and I knew this was the way to go. As I went along, I would catch glimpses of various people praying for me. I saw Mark right here by my bed. I saw Angie in her family room. Becky was praying in her bed. I also saw you," nodding at Blake, "but this is how I know it was just a dream, because I saw you kneeling in a church, but Mark says you have been right here in the ER. Then, I woke up here, feeling fine."

Blake felt really odd, he said, "Whoa, that is so weird. I was praying, kneeling in a church-like place. I had wandered...well...been led, to the hospital chapel. I'd say that what you saw is exactly correct."

There was silence for a moment while they absorbed this. Their thoughts were interrupted by a nurse coming into the room.

The nurse said, "Mrs. Harmon, I just spoke with the doctor, and as he shared with you, he has decided to release you. I will get your final paperwork and it will include a list of symptoms that you should be looking for. It is advised that you have bed rest for the next two days."

In a softer, less business-like tone she said, "I understand that you told the doctor that this was a miracle of God. I saw the CT scan. Only by God's power could you be feeling fine now. God is still in the business of answering prayers. You have a lot to be thankful for."

Beth answered, "I do indeed!"

The nurse promised that she would be back in a few minutes with their discharge paperwork.

Even after the incredibly long night, Blake woke early, feeling better than he had in a long time. He still had the warm glow of feeling God's Spirit being present. He decided that today he was going to make a new start in seeking the Lord. He grabbed his Bible and sat down in his easy chair. He looked at the unopened Bible in his hand and then looked around the room. This just didn't feel right.

It occurred to him that, if he was going to do this right, he needed a better place to meet with the Lord. He thought of Elaine's "prayer closet". Elaine had a chair and tiny

little table set up in a corner of their spare bedroom where she would have her “private time with Jesus”.

He went into the spare bedroom. Although he had stared at her special space many times since her death, he hadn't sat in the chair or moved anything. Right now, he wanted to be close to her Jesus. The best way to do that seemed to be to seek Him as she had sought Him. Yet, it still felt somehow wrong to invade this space that had been so special to her.

Her words from the hospital came into his mind, “Jesus says to tell you that He loves you more than you can imagine, and He will be ready to give you comfort in the coming days, all you have to do is let him. Heaven is going to be wonderful. Blake, come and join me there.” With that thought, he sat down in her chair and opened his Bible.

As he sat in the chair he felt an odd sensation. The chair felt warm, as if Elaine had just gotten up a moment before. For the first time in months, Blake felt close to Elaine. He closed his eyes to savor the sensation, whispering, “I love you, my precious Elaine. I miss you so very much.”

After a few moments the sensation faded. Blake opened his eyes and saw the Bible opened on his lap, momentarily forgotten. “How do I do this?” he wondered.

Again, he closed his eyes and spoke, “Lord, my God, I need your help. I want to be faithful. I want to be close to you. I want to know and believe you. I'm just not sure how to proceed.” He paused for a moment, waiting to see if he would hear or feel some sort of a response, then continued, “Lord, I thank you so very much for hearing my prayer and healing Beth last night. It was absolutely incredible. I had been around your miraculous healings before, but I had never been a part of it before. I realize from what Elaine told me that I didn't really do anything, but it was just You allowing me to participate in the process, but still I feel so...I don't know...empowered. Thank you for letting me experience that. You are so powerful.

“I don't know why you healed Beth, but didn't heal Elaine, but I'm going to do my level best to take it on faith that you had a good reason. Lord, help me to have a strong faith and to trust you. Lord, please continue to help Beth recover.

“Lord, I want to start seeking you daily, but you know I have tried it before and failed. This time, knowing that I can't succeed in my strength, I submit myself to you and ask that you would help me grow into the person that you want me to be. Even now, I am ready to start reading in your Bible and I don't know where to read. You know that I tried to read the Bible from Genesis once, but that plan didn't last very long. All I know right now is that I want to find you, but I don't know how to go about it. Lord, guide me. Help me to achieve what Elaine had! Help me to have the assurance that I will join her in heaven!”

At this point, Blake ran out of things to pray about, so after a brief pause, said, “Amen”. He looked down at his Bible. It was open to the book of Habakkuk. He didn't think he wanted to start his reading there. It occurred to him that what he did want to understand was the salvation of Jesus. At that moment, he decided that he wanted to read the New Testament.

He flipped pages to the gospel of Matthew and began reading.

CHAPTER 11

*“If you seek Him, He will be found by you...”
1 Chronicles 28:9*

As Blake drove to work, he considered his accomplishment of the day. That morning he had finished reading the books of Acts. It had been several weeks since he had sat down in Elaine's chair to start having his almost-daily time with the Lord.

It seemed like ages since he had started with Matthew 1:1, a lot had happened since then. That had been when Beth had just gotten out of the hospital. By now, she was fully recovered, her doctor had given her a clean bill of health. Blake had never really understood what was on Beth's CT scan, but whenever any of the medical professionals saw it and heard the story of her recovery, they were always astonished.

That was also before Blake had gone back to work. While work was OK now, his return to work had triggered a couple of days of severe depression his first weekend after going back. Those were some tough days in which he hadn't wanted to do anything, he didn't do any housework, he didn't eat, he didn't read his Bible or pray and he didn't go to church. All he did for 2 days was feel sorry for himself and miss Elaine.

When Monday morning rolled around, Blake had forced himself to get up to go to work. As he trudged around his apartment getting ready, he had felt a powerful draw to go spend a few minutes in Elaine's prayer closet. He sat there and tried to pray. His prayer rapidly disintegrated into a self-pity filled rant against all the injustices of God taking Elaine from him and ruining his life. As his rant began to run out of steam, he recalled a wonderful trip he and Elaine had taken to the beach. Soon he found himself thanking God for the great times he had been allowed with Elaine and what a blessing she had been. That was definitely a turning point for his day.

Even though he was back in the work routine, he felt rather detached from the whole thing. While he used to be in the middle of the office banter, jokes and socialization, he now found himself more likely to hide in his office and work. It was almost as if he was at his job, but didn't belong. What he had previously considered to be the fun part of working in this office, now was more annoying than anything.

Over the weeks, he had talked to Nikki a several times. They tended to have long, rambling conversations. Although Blake had many friends, Nikki could better relate to what he was going through. She shared her interesting perspective on God – she saw God's hand in everything. She had shared about an ugly crisis that she was concerned about, she had a niece that was potentially being removed from her home due to the parents' drug abuse. Nikki was distressed as she saw this issue tearing her family apart. Blake and Nikki were praying together that God would intercede.

In this period of weeks that Blake had been seeking the Lord, he had seen some fruits from his efforts. He had gained a new awareness of the Lord. While he used to go from Sunday to Sunday with hardly a thought of the Lord, he now thought of the Lord many times through the day. He found himself thinking a quick prayer anytime he was about to give a tough answer or undertake a challenging task. He found that he could lean on the Lord for support when things got tough. In a sermon, his preacher had read a verse that spoke of “walking with the Lord”³⁰. This image had stuck in Blake's mind as he considered how he was going through life with the Lord present in his mind and heart.

Even so, Blake felt spiritually incomplete. He strongly felt like his walk with the Lord still wasn't right, that there should still be more. The Jesus that he had in his life, still didn't resemble the miracle-working, compassionate and totally-in-control-of-all-situations, Jesus he read about in his Bible. As he read about the life in the early church in the book of Acts, he saw God working in their lives in a way that was so terribly different from what he saw today. Reading about how actively involved God was in their day-to-day activities fueled Blake's sense of dissatisfaction.

As he drove, thinking about these things, he pulled out his phone and made a call, "Hi, Mark, how are you doing this beautiful morning?"

Mark cheerfully replied, "Good morning, Blake! I am really blessed. How are you doing?"

"I'm doing really good," said Blake. "How's that fine wife of yours?"

"She is having a good morning getting ready for her day," said Mark.

Blake asked, "So, what would you say about getting together and hanging out this evening?"

"I dare say that would be good, all except I have a meeting with the pastor tonight. How would tomorrow work?"

Blake was a bit disappointed, but tried to hide it, "Sure, tomorrow would be great. Shall we plan on eating together?"

"That would be fine," said Mark, "Why don't you give me a call when you get home from the office and we figure out when and where we'll meet?"

Blake acknowledged the plan and got off the phone. He had really hoped to talk to Mark about his feelings that his relationship with the Lord was still missing something. He just couldn't wrap himself around what was lacking.

CHAPTER 12

"...let us grow in every way into Him who is the head – Christ"
Ephesians 4:15

That evening, after having a frozen dinner and doing some bills, Blake wondered what to do with the next few hours. He considered going to the library or book store to get something new to read, but then his phone rang.

His Caller ID showed that it was Bob, Elaine's dad. Since Elaine's death, Blake had grown closer to his father-in-law. Blake found that he was the only person that really knew Elaine and missed him nearly as much as he did. He suspected that Elaine's mom, Pat, might also fit that criteria, but Blake had never been able to talk to her like he could with Bob. As he answered the call, it crossed his mind that Bob might just find that same comfort talking to Blake, as Blake did talking to him.

"Hey, Bob, what's happening?" said Blake.

"Not much, how are things with you?"

Blake said, "OK, I guess. Work is alright. Home is passable."

"Your words say it is OK, but your voice makes it sound like you have something bothering you. What's up?" asked Bob.

"Well, you know that I have been trying much harder to seek the Lord," replied Blake. "While I have seen some fruit from my new focus, it still seems lacking

somehow. It is almost as if I am slipping back away from where I want to be.” He paused for a moment, but Bob was silent, waiting for Blake to elaborate, so he continued, “When I think of what Elaine had, when I read my Bible, I know that there is more. I just don't know how to go to the next step. What am I missing? Is something wrong with me?”

Bob said, “The truth of the matter is that God loves you more than you could imagine and wants nothing more than to have a deep relationship with you. Having a deep relationship with the Lord is at odds with our natural human state, so we are stuck always fighting between competing interests. There is always a conflict between 'self' and the ideas of this world against real surrender to the will of God. This is every person's struggle. So, what are your specific issues?”

Blake spoke softly, “I pray and sometimes I feel like God is listening, but I don't feel like it is...well...intimate. I read about God's power working in people's lives, but I don't see that in my life. Maybe it is just my loneliness from missing Elaine bleeding over into my spiritual life, but the idea of God as my friend doesn't reflect how I see my reality. I want so much for God to give me purpose and fulfillment, I want Him to heal me of how much it hurts when I think about Elaine.”

“OK, that's a lot of issues, alright.” said Bob. “Let me ask you this, is your God bigger than the God you believed in a couple of months ago?”

“Well, yes, absolutely.”

“And, do you see changes in your life that are a result of your new faith?”

Blake answered, “Yes, I think so, especially at work, but I also see changes just because of my mourning and I'm not always sure which is which. I also see myself doing things that I don't think please God and they aren't going away.”

Bob responded, “That is all perfectly normal. While it would be nice if God would just wave his magic wand over us and make us perfect, the reality is that we will never be perfected until we get to heaven. So, how is your prayer life? What do you pray, how much do you pray?”

“Prayer is tough,” said Blake, “Prayer always seemed to come so easy for Elaine, but it is really a struggle for me. Almost every morning, before work, I sit down and read some Bible, then I spend a few minutes praying for people I know, like you and Beth, and various situations. I also pray for myself, mostly that I'll grow and become more Christ-like.”

“And what does God say to you?”

“What?” Blake said in astonishment.

“When you pray and visit Him in his word, what is God saying?”

Blake was more than a little confused, but he was beginning to worry about his father-in-law. He said, “I don't hear God saying anything, should I?”

Bob answered, “Our God is really amazing in a multitude of ways, but one that is really hard to grasp is that He is a personal God. You know that he loves you, but it is easy to think that He loves all people as a group. However, the truth is that He loves you, Blake, as an individual. He knows you, inside and out, and He loves you in spite of all the junk He might see there. He hears your prayers. He knows your needs, your weaknesses, your fears. He knows what you are capable of, even if you don't. He wants the very best for you and He even knows what that is, even better than you do.

“So many people have come to see prayer as a time to talk at God, giving Him requests and complaints. Prayer in the Bible does include that, but was also so much more. We are supposed to have a real relationship with the Living God. A real relationship can't be built on one-way communication. We need to talk, to converse, with God. Our prayer must be based on both speaking and listening, otherwise we might as well just carve our self a wooden idol to talk to. Unlike any wooden idol, God want to be active in the details of our life.”

Bob continued, “He created each one of us to fulfill a specific purpose, a divine purpose. In order to fulfill this purpose, He has work to do in our lives. He wants to mold and shape us, to form and empower us. He does this so that when we meet this purpose, we are not doing it under our own power or with human limitations. He wants us to face His ordained challenges as His representative, not just doing things as we imagine He might want, but serving as His hands, feet and mouth.

“While the Bible is an amazing instrument, many people seem to have forgotten what it says and demonstrates: God speaks directly to His people. He speaks to His people to guide them, lead them, teach them, and most importantly to direct them in fulfilling His purpose on the earth. For a Christian to be complete, He must seek what God wants with him both through the written word and each individual's personal word.”

“You're really serious about this, aren't you?” asked Blake.

“Absolutely, I am. God gave us the Holy Spirit, living inside us, so He could speak to us and guide us. The Holy Spirit is our personal phone that connects us to the Lord. It allows us to speak to Him and allows Him to speak to us. We cannot be the faithful servant that God wants us to be without being receptive to his voice. To do what He wants, we have to hear what it is that He wants”

Bob continued, “It is like this: When Paul prayed for the people of Colossae he prayed: ‘For this reason also, since the day we heard this, we haven't stopped praying for you. We are asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding, so that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to Him, bearing fruit in every good work and growing in the knowledge of God.’³¹ Paul knew that for these people to be following God's plan for their lives, they had to know what God wanted.”

Blake asked, “Just what are you talking about here, is this like God calls me once to a lifetime ministry or is this a question of turn left or right at the traffic light?”

Bob laughed softly and said, “Perhaps a little of both. God speaks when He wants to speak. We have to be constantly attuned to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Our lives are full of consequential decisions, but many of them seem so unimportant at the time. A choice of a route for the morning commute could lead to or avoid an accident. A choice to stop off at the store could place you in the presence of an acquaintance in desperate need. Even the choice of clothing for the day could influence a chance meeting. God sees a much bigger picture than we do. It is odd, but our perceptions of which decisions are 'important' are usually wrong. This means that we have to always be listening.”

“If we are going to lead the life we are called to, it can't just be seeking His will on what we think are the big decisions, we must live in submission to the Spirit inside us. He gave us the Holy Spirit to guide us. Having a guide does us no good if we ignore Him.”

"I'm not sure I have ever heard God speak." said Blake.

Bob answered, "You may have without knowing it. He has probably spoken to you many times, but you missed it. You see, the promptings of the Holy Spirit can be so easy to ignore. Trying to hear that 'still, small voice'³², the Bible talks about, is challenging, even if we weren't living in a world that was so loud. Many people aren't even good at listening with their ears, and listening to that voice in their heart provides a whole new challenge. Then, in spite of what the Bible says, having God talk to you is considered a symptom of mental illness in this world. The combination of listening to God being difficult and it being socially misunderstood, results in a situation in which people aren't even sure they want to hear from God."

"I'll agree that this isn't easy, or even obvious, that this is something we need to do." said Blake.

"Somehow, the church has largely forgotten this significant function of the Holy Spirit, but remember Jesus said that the only people that will enter heaven are those that do the will of God. How can anybody do the will of God, unless they hear what His will is for them? What is the value of a servant that doesn't hear the instructions of the Master?"

Blake asked, "Bob, there are a ton of Christians out there that never hear the voice of God. Are you saying that none of them are being obedient to God even if they are trying hard to follow the Bible?"

"Yes," answered Bob, "that is what I am saying. Hearing those promptings of the Holy Spirit are absolutely essential for a life in Christ. Without hearing His voice, it is impossible to be obedient. Without hearing from the Lord we cannot be leading the life that He desires for us, we cannot do the will of God without knowing what that will is. Without listening to the Lord, how can we ever hope to enter heaven?"

Blake asked, "You even think that a person's salvation may hinge on whether he hears God speak?"

Bob said, "So many people have come to believe in a generic God that just deals with everybody the same, but the God of the Bible is a personal God. He created us as individuals, He loves us as individuals, He helps us as individuals AND he expects us to serve Him as individuals. To serve Him as He wants me to serve him, I have to listen to Him and know what He wants me to do."

"Bob, I hear what you are saying about how essential it is to hear and be obedient to God and that makes some sense in regard to the mature Christian, but what about the new Christian? Is the newly saved Christian out of God's will because he isn't following some plan from God?"

Bob replied, "Oh, but they ARE doing exactly what God wants! The typical new Christian needs time to get used to their new persona. They need time to grow and expand. In most cases God will give them that opportunity. The new Christian experiences a huge thrill that comes about both because they have experienced God for the first time and because it feels really good to be in the middle of God's will. The sad thing is that many Christians never grow beyond that point, they don't stay will God's will. It is like the Lord says, 'I am so glad you decided to join me, we can sit for a little while and get to know one another,' then later when He says, 'OK, now walk with Me, we have work to do,' it is like the new Christian says, 'I have so liked it here, I think I'll stay longer.'"

“So you mean to say that somebody can be obediently serving God while not doing anything?” said Blake.

“There are typically periods, not just as a new Christian, but throughout a Christian’s life that God gives him a chance to get renewed, restored and prepared for the next task. Remember, this is the same God that established the Sabbath, so His people would have a chance to rest. But, even those periods of rest are an act of obedience. For a Christian to be a good servant of God, he must listen and obey.

“He is very serious about this. God says, ‘You must follow the LORD your God and fear Him. You must keep His commands and listen to His voice; you must worship Him and remain faithful to Him.’³³ He also says, ‘Pay attention to Me, My people, and listen to Me, My nation; for instruction will come from Me, and My justice for a light to the nations. I will bring it about quickly.’³⁴ God wants us to be His: listening and thereby able to serve Him.

“Listening or not listening to our personal word of the Lord is a matter of faith. If we truly believe that He is the God described in the Bible, then we must expect Him to speak to us the way He has spoken to people throughout biblical history. The God of the Bible does speak, He does lead his servants.

“You are right though, for many Christians, they have never experienced the direct guidance of God. We have come to believe that God only speaks to a special few. Yet, He has told us that the Holy Spirit would live inside each of us. The Greek word used by John to describe the Holy Spirit's role in our life is 'parakletos', which means 'one that is called alongside to help, counsel, or protect'. Scripture demonstrates how He helps, counsels and protects through communicating with His people.”

Blake asked, “So, if God is so intent on speaking to His people, why are so few hearing Him?”

“I guess there are several reasons,” said Bob, “the first and most obvious reason would be a lack of true faith in the God of the Bible. To me, this is a truly scary reason for failure to hear and obey God. It is considered 'convenient' and 'comfortable' to believe in a little, bitty God. Folks like having a little God that they can pull out on Sunday morning or when there is a crisis. They love having their God safely put away, so that He doesn't interfere with all the rest of their life, but that isn't the real God.”

“The real God is one who lives and works intimately in the lives of His people. His people are those that submit to Him the control over their lives. The only real relationship between a human and the God of all creation is one in which He works as God and King over the human's life, the way the relationship is described in the Bible. Having this sort of relationship requires the faith to accept Him as who He really is, not trying to squeeze Him down into a more convenient form.

“If our faith-image of God doesn't allow for a God that leads and directs our life, then we won't hear from Him. There are simply too many distractions in this world, so we simply ignore the subtle voice of the Lord.”

Blake asked, “Is the voice of God always so small and ignorable? It would seem like there are times that He would be loud and obvious.”

“You are quite right.” said Bob, “He does have a way of getting our attention that He uses on occasion. Just ask Saul of Tarsus or Jonah, because they could tell you about how effective God can be at getting a person's attention. However, God does not usually use extreme measures to gain somebody's attention. For most people, if their image of

God doesn't include Him directing their life, God doesn't usually intercede with an obvious miracle. He is more likely to just wait on them to wise up."

Bob continued, "To hear God's guidance for our life, we must have the real faith to accept that He wants and deserves to be the leader over our life."

"Then, another slightly-related reason not to hear from God, is when people expect God to speak on their terms only. Now, of course, God has the perfect purposes and plans. Our ideas and plans can never get close to the perfection of His. Still some folks think that God will serve as a genie to help them implement their plans. These people are missing the point of serving God."

Blake said, "How's that?"

Bob explained, "A Christian that suddenly starts seeking 'the will of God' when they are preparing to make a big purchase or decision, doesn't understand what 'the will of God' means. In the Bible, He describes our conformance to God's plan as, 'He has told you men what is good and what the Lord requires of you:..to walk humbly with your God.'³⁵ If we will be found to have done the will of our Father in heaven, then we need to walk through our life alongside our God. We are not called to drag Him around as we follow our plan, because after all, He is God. Instead, we need to walk, going where our Master goes, as His faithful servant."

"God wants the entirety of our life. Our life goal should be to serve Him. Christianity is not about doing whatever I want, with God's help. Instead Christianity is about living the life He wants, with God doing the work. We must remain open to hearing God's guidance at all times and under all circumstances. God isn't good at being convenient to us. He is the mighty ruler of the universe. When He has instructions for us, we need to be listening and available."

Bob went on, "Another reason that people don't hear God is that they don't know how to listen for Him."

Blake said, "I have to admit, I don't have a clue how to listen for God's voice. I don't guess that it is an audible voice I hear with my ears, is it?"

"He certainly can speak that way," answered Bob, "because I have read about it and heard about it, but I haven't experienced it personally. All the times I have heard from God, I have heard it from inside."

"I think that's good," said Blake, "I think that would be a little spooky."

Bob laughed, "That might be true. But for me, God expects me to have to have to listen hard to hear him and face it, we aren't even very good at listening with our ears. When it comes to hearing the whispers of the Holy Spirit, we are at a real disadvantage. Among all the noise of the world, we get really good at 'tuning out' all the extraneous noise. We hear only what we want to focus on, and ignore the rest. People can live right next to railroad tracks and after a period of time, they don't hardly hear the noisy train coming by.

"To listen to God requires an entirely different sort of listening that doesn't even use our ears. This sort of listening is extremely foreign to most people. It can be really difficult, because it is so foreign, but it is a skill that can be sharpened by practice. I don't really think that listening to God can be taught. It is an action that must be born out of faith. We must believe that God will speak. Furthermore, we must be willing to trust what we hear, even though there may be many times when we aren't positive that it was God that we heard.

“The experience of hearing God or hearing the promptings of the Holy Spirit can sound like very different experiences from person-to-person. Our God is a very personal God. I do not believe that He approaches me the same way He approaches you. Consequently, our personal God experiences may sound very different, but since He created each of us different from one another and since He can do all things, these different experiences shouldn't come as a surprise.

“When I listen for the word of God, I try to quiet my mind and listen to the One that isn't me, but exists inside me. This isn't a process that can be explained. For me, the process of learning to listen to God was a matter of trial, error and practice.”

Blake asked, “How can you practice listening to God? The picture that jumps into my mind is to sit quietly while you have somebody pretend to be God, by speaking in a soft, soft whisper.”

Bob laughed, “I'm not sure that would be much help, because listening to God doesn't involve your ears. Here's something that did help me: as a part of my routine time with the Lord, I would ask the Lord, 'What would You like me to read today?' Then, I would silence my mind and wait until a Scripture came to me. Whatever Scripture came to me, I would read it seeking what the Lord might be trying to communicate to me.”

“I could not guess how many times I have done this. More often than not, I do not find a message in the book, chapter or verse that came into my head, but there are also many times when God spoke through the Scripture. In this process, by trial and error, and with little risk, I have become better at hearing the voice of God.”

Bob said, “Which leads me to another reason that people don't hear from God, when they do hear, they promptly deny that the voice was God's. You see, there is always some risk in inaccuracies in hearing God. There is also a fear that we will imagine God told us to do something and that the actions will not be God's plan. Since it is vitally important that we listen to and obey God, we mustn't let that fear stop us from listening. God has provided a way in which we can determine the true word of God and not be deceived.

“You see, there have been people that have become convinced that they have heard God tell them to do bad things. Remember, God is always going to be true to Himself and He can't ever tell you to do anything contrary to the Bible. Jesus told us how we can know what voices are His, as he describes Himself as a shepherd: 'He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought all his own outside, he goes ahead of them. The sheep follow him because they recognize his voice. They will never follow a stranger; instead they will run away from him, because they don't recognize the voice of strangers.'³⁶ Jesus assumes that all those that are 'His' will recognize His voice. Recognizing any voice requires hearing it many times. The voice of Jesus is no exception. We must hear it repeatedly in order to learn how to recognize and obey it. Otherwise we are subject to being deceived.

“The history of the world and the Bible both contain the stories of individuals that believed they were doing the 'will of God', but they were deceived. Consider the actions of the Pharisees in persecuting the church. I am sure they had complete faith in their actions being consistent with the will of God. It is now obvious that they did not hear the voice of God telling them to do this.”

Blake broke in, "I have certainly heard of people doing some nutty or even evil things and claiming they we doing the 'will of God'. I sure wouldn't want to wind up in that position."

"Nor would I," said Bob, "but, we can also find ourselves living a life that is outside of the will of God unless we are continuously defending ourselves against deception and seeking God's voice leading us into the life He wants us to lead. We need to understand His character through reading His Bible and learn to recognize His voice. This will allow us to know when it is Him speaking and to disregard any other voice."

Blake was curious, "So, what other voice might we hear?"

Bob answered, "The most obvious would be 'self' speaking what it wants. I once had a church member who came to me and said that he believed it was the will of God that he divorce his wife and get with this girl in his office. That obviously wasn't God telling him to do that. I think that what he wanted became dominant over his desire to hear what God wanted, so he somehow justified this desire. In addition, I believe in the Satan described in the Bible; the scripture says he 'is prowling around like a roaring lion, looking for anyone he can devour'³⁷ and that 'he is a liar and the father of liars.'³⁸ Like God, I believe he has plans for us, but they are designed to keep us weak and outside of the kingdom of God."

Blake said, "I can just imagine being deceived into doing something wrong, thinking you were doing it for God. That would make the whole idea of listening to God or even just being a Christian seem foolish to all the onlookers. I can see where Satan would really benefit from that."

"Of course he would," said Bob. "The last thing Satan wants is to have people carrying out God's will, because that is far too powerful. When a person works hand-in-hand with the Lord, incredible things can happen for the kingdom. He is much happier if people just keep following their plans and interests, because there is no power in that."

"So anyway," Bob went on, "that is mostly why folks don't hear the voice of God...Oh wait a minute, I guess I forgot one of the big reasons: they don't want to hear what He has to say. There are many people that just don't want to be obedient to God's plan."

"It is entirely too easy to find ourselves really comfortable in the life we are already leading. Even if that life isn't perfect, it is known. We know the traps, the threats and the pitfalls of our current life. We don't want anybody telling us what to do. We don't want to do something where we might fail miserably. We don't want to enter into the unknown. These all combine to make the idea of God speaking to us about our life rather threatening."

Blake said, "I can relate to that. I get scared about the idea of God sending me off on some unfamiliar track."

"I understand," said Bob, "the hardest part of listening to God is to trust Him with what we hear. When God gives us an instruction, we suddenly have a million reasons not to be obedient to the voice. We ask questions like: What if that was my imagination and the voice wasn't God at all? How can I possibly do this? What if I make a fool of myself? How can I explain this to my friends? I'm not really strong enough, important enough, brave enough, outgoing enough, or whatever. Can't He send somebody else? What if I fail? What if people think I'm crazy?"

Blake said, "Or how about, 'What if I am crazy?'"

Bob laughed, then got serious, “You know, it all comes down to our faith. Does our faith allow us to fully trust Him? Trusting God isn't easy, even though we know that He knows everything and we only know a little, He has unlimited power and perfect wisdom. God even knows the future. With all that, we still insist that we know best. Even with Him, as the Almighty, we still fear that we might fail in His plan.”

“We have to remember that the 70 year-old woman in a dilapidated apartment that allows God to work through her is much more powerful than the young, rich, up-and-coming politician using all his resources. God working toward His plan is God, the Almighty, working. There is no force on earth that is more powerful. When He allows His people to be a part of His plan, He provides all they need to be successful.

“Any person who is doing the will of God is not doing it under His or Her own limited power, they are operating under God's power, which is without limits. Through a willing instrument, God will accomplish what He wants to accomplish, even if the Christian He works through doesn't know what that goal is. Failure is not an option when God is running the show.”

“While nobody ever promised that faithfully serving God would be comfortable, it is our responsibility and our joy. While Paul described the tough things he had to endure, he was also one of the most prolific writers on the subject of rejoicing. Being in the middle of God's will is what we are here for.”

Blake said, “Maybe there is joy when you get there, but the idea of turning God loose with my life to do whatever He wants is a bit scary. As I remember, when He told Moses to go back to Egypt, He was sending Moses right back into what He had been running away from for all those years.”

Bob said, “You are right. Sometimes, our first response to an instruction from God is going to be fear. It is necessary for us to focus on who He is and how He takes care of His people. Fear must be replaced by faith in Him. He really wants a right-relationship with us. In Psalms it says, 'For He is our God and we are the people of His pasture, the sheep under His care. Today, if you hear His voice: Do not harden your hearts as at Meribah...’¹³⁹”

Bob continued, “Even though trusting God is something that grows and develops over a lifetime, you can't really be God's until you trust Him enough to let him be God in your life.”

Blake said, “You make that sound easy, but I'm not sure it is.”

“I wish it was,” said Bob, “On the one hand, it is extremely easy, because God does all the work, the tough part is letting Him do it. It is so easy to tell God, 'I give you my life', but to have a ton of disclaimers, exceptions and caveats in the fine print. Often, by the time reality hits, we haven't offered Him anything, our life is still in our own control.”

Blake said, “Hmmm, I think I might have done that. I give Him control Sunday and take it back on Monday. Well, this has given me plenty to think about and work on.”

Bob said apologetically, “I really didn't mean to preach a sermon, I just get excited. You know, I am really proud of the spiritual growth that I have seen in you.”

Blake answered, “I'm not sure that my progress has been worthy of any praise.” At that point, Blake was thinking of a very private struggle area, Becky.

“By the way,” Blake said, “do you remember the tall, thin nurse with the short brown hair that worked the day-shift in the ICU, her name was Becky.”

“Sure, she was a really good nurse, it seems like she gave us a lot of support.” said Bob.

“I ran into her the other day at Wal-Mart.”

Bob asked, “So, how is she doing?”

“Overall, very good, I guess.” Blake said, “She is struggling a little under the stress of her job. You know, I never really thought about it, but every day there are people in the ICU going through what we went through. They sit up there with their loved one, just teetering on the edge between life and death. While some of the patients get better; as we saw, some do not. Becky gets really close to the patients and their families, especially when they are up there for a long time like we were. That takes a toll on her.”

What Blake didn't tell his father-in-law, was that when Blake had seen Becky, she had catalyzed all of the pent up physical tension from not being with a woman for months. When he started talking to her, his mind had gone crazy thinking about her curves, her smile, her eyes and her curves again. At the store, she had been wearing much less than she ever wore in the ICU. Her manner had been so friendly, he had been debating whether she was actually being flirtatious or if it was just his imagination. He still wasn't exactly sure how he came away from the conversation with her phone number.

While he was trying to be a good Christian, obedient to God, Becky kept popping up in his mind, day and night. He was disgusted with the nature of his thoughts and fantasies about her. The dreams were the worst. He felt like his mind was being unfaithful to Elaine. He felt like a failure, with a righteousness was so shallow, that one nice looking girl that talks to him makes everything else go out the window.

Part of him was sure that he should delete her number from his phone, while another part of him was holding on tight to the number. There were a few times he had been tempted to call it, but to do so required a moral leap that he wasn't prepared to take. He justified that if he didn't actually do anything, then it was OK. Yet, he felt guilty for the thoughts he was harboring.

Bob said, “That doesn't surprise me much. She is a girl that really cares about people, but the people she cares about in her job have needs much bigger than what she can supply.”

“Are you suggesting that it would be easier for her to care less?” asked Blake.

“It would be less emotionally taxing if she could do that, but I suspect that this is exactly what attracted her to critical care nursing, she wanted to help people that are in need. Her job allows her to do that, but it could also burn her out. Burn out is very common in 'helping others' occupations like nursing, teaching, social work, police and preaching. There is just so much need in this world and there are limits to what we can humanly do. Most people avoid burn-out by either stopping their caring or learn to rely on God as a source of strength.”

As Blake's mind raced around on a dozen different subjects, he suddenly blurted out, “So, what is it like, when God speaks to you?”

“Well,” answered Bob, “that is hard to say. God seems to have a variety of ways of talking to us. I have had dreams that I was sure were from God. I have experienced gentle nudgings that I couldn't really tell if they were God or something else. I have experienced times where He communicates as clearly as somebody sitting right across the

table from me. There were times when I was absolutely positive I was hearing from the Lord, there have also been many cases in which I wasn't at all sure. When the Spirit of the Lord comes close, then the sensation is indescribable and glorious and distinctly Him. There have been times that what He had to say was very scary. There have also been times when His word has calmed and comforted me. Still other times, He had reprimanded me and made me feel guilty and pitiful.

"I don't think I answered your question, Blake, but I'm not sure I can. He's the God that made whales, bacteria and anteaters, He doesn't do things the same every time. Just as you and I can have very different experiences together, our experiences with Him are going to be different on different occasions.

"If that weren't vague enough an answer, I think different people perceive their experiences with the Lord very differently. Pat describes a couple of 'visions' the Lord has given her. I have never experienced anything like what she describes. You can't expect your God-experience to be like Elaine's experience, it just doesn't seem to work that way."

Blake said, "Really? Knowing as much as I did about her relationship with the Lord, I had sort of assumed that I could use that as a goal or a model of what a good relationship looks like."

"That's not exactly what I meant. Just as we can look at the relationships of the Bible heroes in order to know what is possible, we can do the same thing with some of the saints in our lives, like Elaine. But you cannot expect your experience to be the same as theirs. God created you as an individual. He approaches you differently than he does other people, he has different expectations for you, and you have different needs before you can grow into those expectations."

"So you don't think I will grow into having conversations with God the way Elaine did?" asked Blake.

Bob answered, "I can't say what God has in mind for you. I believe you and God will communicate, but whether it will resemble how it was for Elaine, I couldn't say."

"It is so easy," said Blake, "to fall into the habit of thinking of God as a one-size-fits-all type being. The idea of Him treating every person as an individual is tough to hold onto."

"We really expect Him to be human-like. Humans can't treat billions of people as individuals, so we have trouble imagining God doing it. We expect Him to be like TV, where everybody gets the same signal."

Blake laughed, "That's a good analogy. That is exactly what I expect when I don't really stop and think about His nature."

That night Blake didn't sleep well. His dreams just never would let him completely let his weight down. The first dream that woke him involved Elaine and Becky fighting in the grocery store. There was something about a disagreement about the price of canned peaches that turned into a wrestling match.

He was disturbed by a dream in which God was speaking to him while he was trying to give a presentation at work. Everybody in the room was laughing at him, because they couldn't hear anything. Even though he knew it was God speaking, he couldn't understand a word of it. He woke this time feeling inadequate and foolish.

He woke, again, after a dream where he was getting romantic with Elaine in the mountain cabin where they had their honeymoon, but she turned into Becky and slapped him. When she slapped him, he looked up and they were on some sort of a stage in front of a big audience and members of the press taking pictures.

The dreams just kept coming. Real rest was not available this night. Blake was almost grateful when the alarm clock went off.

CHAPTER 13

*“Set your minds on what is above, not what is on the earth.”
Colossians 3:2*

After work that same day, Blake called Mark and arranged to meet him at a bakery-restaurant place that was convenient for both of them. When Blake arrived, Mark was standing outside enjoying the warm sun. They went inside and ordered sandwiches. Mark suggested they eat at one of the outdoor tables. As they ate, they caught up on the events in each other's lives.

After a while, there came a pause and Blake asked, “Mark, you know I have been trying hard to grow closer to the Lord. In some respects, I have been doing pretty well, I guess, but I am having some issues with some thoughts. These thoughts aren't really appropriate and they won't go away.”

“My guess is that these thoughts are sexual in nature.” said Mark.

“Well, yes. How did you know?”

Mark said, “We are guys, we are wired that way. Not that this makes it OK or anything, but it is not unusual. Every Christian's mind is a battleground. Just like the way that armies can fight over a piece of land, with one army taking control over it today, then the opposing forces taking control the next, we have a personal Armageddon in our heads. God and Satan each want control of our minds.”

Blake commented, “I can't think a few fantasies are exactly Armageddon.”

“No,” said Mark, “by themselves they aren't. James explains to us how our 'evil desires' entice us, then those same thoughts 'give birth to sin', then that sin 'gives birth to death.’¹⁴⁰”

“I still think that is a huge exaggeration of what I am dealing with.”

“Let me ask you this, Blake, do you think that a faithful husband just wakes up one day and says, 'I think I'll have an affair'? Or that a young man decides that he wants to seek a career as a homeless drunk? Would a young girl strive to become a drug addicted prostitute? Of course not! People don't seek to have a life that is ruined by sin, but it happens all the time. It all starts with a thought, usually something small. This thought may seem totally outrageous, but when it runs around and around in a person's head, it starts becoming more acceptable and more enticing. Then, that thought becomes an action. It is soon replaced by another thought. This process continues until the person finds themselves in a situation that they would never have dreamed they would be into.”

Blake said, “I knew that the thoughts I was having didn't feel 'right', but I didn't really think they would ever lead into action...well, maybe they could have...I don't know.”

“I understand,” said Mark, “I have been there. What I have learned, the hard way, it is impossible to hold a holy God and sinful thoughts in your mind at the same time. What I did when I was having these thoughts or even the actions associated with them, was to start shutting God out of times and places in my life. Over time, God got shut out of more and more as the sinful side grew. If I had never woken up, I would have eventually abandoned God completely, turning myself fully over to my sin.”

“Ouch! That's awful,” said Blake.

“The second book of Corinthians provides the solution. Paul says, 'We demolish arguments and every high-minded thing that is raised up against the knowledge of God, taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ.'⁴¹ Everybody is going to have inappropriate thoughts come into their heads, the question is, what are you going to do with those thoughts? Will we allow them to take up residence, or will we send them packing? I bet there are already many thoughts that come into your head that you just don't entertain.”

Mark continued, “Let me give you an example. Today I was trying to get a sandwich at a deli and the clerk at the counter was insisting on giving me too much change. I tried and tried to do the right thing and explain that I had given him a \$10 dollar bill and not a \$20, but then he started to get angry with me, like I was trying to cheat them. The thought came into my mind to grab him and shove the \$10 bill in his mouth, but I didn't entertain that thought for even a moment.”

“So what happened with the \$10?” asked Blake.

“I wound up with it,” said Mark. “Unless I come across a needy person that needs it, I'll just toss it in the offering plate at church. You know what's odd about this story, is the deli had a tip jar sitting there and I could have put the money in there, but I just couldn't bring myself to reward the young man for not doing his job well. His register will come up short and maybe that will be a learning experience for him.”

“But, anyway,” Mark went on, “this thought of violence was really no different than any other thought that comes into our minds, except that I didn't entertain it. When it showed up, I knew it was wrong and I just didn't go there. Some of these wrong thoughts are more appealing than others and consequently harder to get rid of. Look at it this way, if you were cleaning up at the church and you came across a copy of Playboy in the sanctuary, then you would throw that away immediately. It obviously has no place in the church. Well, the Bible says that we are to be the sanctuary for God⁴², so what is inappropriate for the church sanctuary is inappropriate for us.”

Blake was unconvinced and asked, “Realistically, how does that work out in your life?”

“In general,” Mark answered, “I do pretty well these days, but there was a time when my mind was a sewer. I know all about how letting sinful thoughts into your mind can gradually push God out of your life. I came to realize that where my mind goes, the rest of me will follow. When I spend my time thinking about the things of the world, then my faith gets undermined. It was a subtle process, that I didn't even notice, but then one day I looked up and realized that my walk with God was a joke.”

He went on, “Now I know that I have to keep careful control over what goes on in my head. Temptation is not just actions. Remember how Jesus said that looking at a woman with lust is the same as committing adultery with her⁴³? What goes on in your thoughts is spiritually important.”

Blake asked, "So what do you do when some crazy thought shows up?"

"I don't know, I guess I do different things different times because the tempting thoughts come in different flavors. Sometimes I can just push it out by my own will. There are other cases when I just start to give the Lord praise, because praise and sinful thoughts can't be in the mind at the same time. There are other times when I know I am in over my head when I will pray and call on the Lord to shield me from the thought. I know that it is God's will that I be pure and righteous, so I can confidently ask Him to help that happen. Although I don't believe a person is ever totally free of these nuisances as long as they are on this side of heaven, but it does get easier with practice."

Blake said, "I guess I expected you to say something like that, but in a way I had hoped you would say, 'thoughts don't make any difference, don't worry about them!'"

Mark laughed, "Sorry, buddy. If I can help you avoid some of the mistakes I have made, then that would make me very happy. So how do you feel about your spiritual position?"

"Gee, I don't know..." said Blake as his cell phone started ringing. He glanced at the caller ID and saw that it was Nikki. He thought this was odd since he usually called her. He said to Mark, "Excuse me a sec, it's Nikki."

Speaking into the phone, Blake said, "Hi, Nikki"

Nikki said, "Hey Blake, how are you doing? Did I catch you at a bad time?"

"I am doing great, I was just having after-dinner cup of coffee with Mark."

"The same Mark that brought you to my house?" said Nikki.

"The very one."

Nikki said, "Well, tell Mark that I said 'Hello'. I won't keep you, but I wanted to pass on an invitation. The situation with my sister and her baby is getting more and more critical. I wanted to have a few people gather at my house tomorrow evening for some serious prayer intervention. Would you be available tomorrow evening for a couple of hours?"

Blake was surprised and said, "Are you sure you want me there? I'm not exactly the mature prayer warrior."

She laughed as she said, "I was told to have you there. If you have any questions, you can direct them upward."

Blake was startled again, "Oh. Then, I guess I better be there. What time? Do I need to bring anything?"

"Be here at seven and just bring a servant's heart." she said.

"OK, I'll be there."

"I'm glad. See you tomorrow. Bye-Bye."

With that, the connection ended. Blake was a bit dazed by the whole thing. He told Mark, "She said to tell you 'Hello'. She was calling to invite me to some sort of a prayer intervention. I think I told you about how her sister was doing drugs and it made a really bad environment for Nikki's niece. Social services had been called by somebody in the family and it was creating a huge rift. But through it all, the sister is in total denial that there is any problem. Apparently the whole thing is coming to a head, and Nikki wants to bring out the big prayer guns. Perhaps she was hallucinating, but she is convinced that I am supposed to be there. I really can't imagine that I could be of any use."

Mark said, "God doesn't operate the way we expect. Furthermore, while we look at ourselves and see our shortcomings, He looks at us and sees our potential. If God wants you there, then you shouldn't miss it for the world."

"I suppose you are right," Blake said. "Well, maybe we should call it a night..."

"Oh, no you don't," said Mark. "Just before Nikki's well-timed call, you were going to tell me about your walk with the Lord."

"I guess I was," Blake said sheepishly, "In many ways, the Lord is becoming more real to me, but I don't feel like I have the faith I should. It is like I am just going through the motions sometimes, as if the Lord was there, but I can't really tell He is there or not."

Mark said, "That is almost a definition of faith. The book of Hebrews says, 'Faith is the reality of what is hoped for, the proof of what is not seen'⁴⁴. Going on as if He is there when He isn't being obvious really requires exercising more faith than working where you see His hand and feel His Spirit."

"I guess I know that," said Blake, "but it feels like I'm not doing something right when I can't feel His presence or see any answers to my prayers."

Mark said, "There will be times like that, you just can't let that discourage you. Keep looking for His hand. Keep praising and thanking Him. So, how are things at work, are you able to walk with the Lord there?"

"That's sometimes hard, because my work is complicated and requires all my concentration. I do a little prayer before an important meeting sometimes...well, now that I think about it, I guess I mostly leave the Lord at home when I go to work."

Mark replied, "That is easy to do. You know that God can help you a lot at work? There was a time when I got in my head that God couldn't help with technical matters, then it dawned on me that every bit of technology is His. There isn't anything that He can't do, because He is God. But, more than that, He wants to be God over your entire life, without exception."

"I hear what you say," Blake said, "but my work is so high-paced. It's not like I can just stop and take a few minutes to pray when things get intense."

"Prayer doesn't always have to be like that. Do you know the story of Nehemiah?"

"I'm not sure, I get a lot of those guys mixed up," said Blake.

"His big story is that God had him rebuild Jerusalem out of ruins, but one of the most interesting things happens very early in the story. He is working as the cupbearer to the king. The king asked him an important question and right there in between question and answer, Nehemiah prayed to God. Prayer doesn't always have to be eyes-closed, cloistered away in your private place, often we just shoot the Lord an arrow-prayer right in the middle of the action. If we are going to walk with the Lord, we can't just be with Him from time-to-time, we need to walk with Him all the time."

Blake responded, "I know that Elaine used to talk about praying while driving or praying while giving a presentation at work, but I never really understood. I guess where I came from, unless your prayer was...well...more formalized 'prayer time' then it wasn't prayer. On the other hand, a lot of the ideas I had about prayer have been garbage."

"Prayer is just spending time with God," said Mark. "It is making that connection between you and your God intentional. It is pushing open that door that faces God so He can touch you, help you or guide you. That door tends to swing shut unless we keep

opening it. That can be done in a fraction of a second when there are other things going on. Right in the middle of the action, we can reach out and touch Almighty God and know that He is with us. That can be huge when the going gets tough.”

“That’s an interesting image,” said Blake.

Mark continued, “As for praying while driving, it is a lot like having a conversation with a passenger, you sure don’t close your eyes, nor does the prayer have your total concentration. But, it can be a wonderful time with the Lord anyway. I remember it taking a little getting used to, when I first started praying while driving, but now I consider it to be a valuable time with the Lord. I did notice people looking at me like I was crazy, because I was talking in my car with nobody else in there. But if you are worried about that, then all you have to do is wear a bluetooth and everybody thinks you are talking on the phone.”

Mark and Blake laughed together.

CHAPTER 14

“Don’t be afraid. Only believe.” Mark 5:36

The next day Blake was having lunch with Andy. They sat on high stools at a counter with other customers in this busy sandwich shop. As they talked and laughed about office antics, Andy suddenly said, “Hey, do you know Jerome Johnson, the comedian?”

Blake said, “No, the name doesn’t mean anything to me.”

“He’s the local guy that is starting to make it big. He’s performing at the First Street Comedy Club tonight, do you want to go?”

“OK...Oh, wait a minute, no I can’t. I’m going to this prayer thing tonight,” said Blake.

Andy was surprised, “A prayer thing?...You?...In the middle of the week?...When we could go have fun?...Come on. What’s up with that?”

“I got asked by this gal I know, and I told her I would go.”

Andy pushed his glasses up on his nose and said, “Ohhh. I should have known there was a girl involved. Now it makes more sense.”

“Andy, it’s not like that. She’s a friend and she’s got trouble with family members involved with drugs and problems coming from that. She wanted to get people together to pray for the family.”

“She must be pretty desperate if she is resorting to having people pray about the problem.”

“Actually,” said Blake, “she knows that there is a tremendous amount of power in prayer. We have been praying together about this issue for weeks, but she decided it was time to gather a group together to pray about it. I’m not exactly sure what to expect, but I’m kinda looking forward to it.”

Their lunch finished, Blake and Andy threw away their trash and began the walk back to the office. The day was comfortable, but looked like it might rain.

“So you are getting pretty serious about your Christianity these days,” said Andy.

“Well, yes, I guess so. I’ve come to realize that all the time I spent having a little touch of Christianity I was just fooling myself. Christianity is so much more than just

going to church once in a while or having a bumper sticker on your car. You know that losing Elaine was one of the most awful things that could have ever happened to me, it still hurts incredibly, but the Lord has been with me. I always knew that Jesus was a huge part of Elaine's life. I couldn't ever see Him the same way she did. Since her death, I have been able to accept Him for who He is, instead of who I wanted Him to be. In a sense, it has been like opening the window blinds in a dark room to let the sunlight flood in. I have been totally astonished by what seems like a completely new area of my life."

Andy was quiet for a moment, then said, "I knew that you seemed a little different, but I put it down to Elaine and all."

"I'm sure that the loss of Elaine has changed me, I don't know how it couldn't, but I think more of me has changed by learning what her life was really about. I feel like I understand her better now than I did when she was living. While I really wish she was here to share this with, I might never have gotten off of my self-satisfied, self-reliant rump to really submit to her Jesus while she lived. I was so sure that life was as good as it could get. I was so very wrong."

They were both quietly tending their own thoughts, then Andy asked, "What did you mean by accepting Him for who He is, instead of who you wanted him to be?"

"Well...let's see...OK, let's say that I based our friendship on you being my physical trainer."

Andy was aghast at the idea, "That would never work. I'm about as unphysical as they come. That would ruin my 'overweight geek' reputation."

Blake responded, "Exactly! It doesn't work to base a relationship on a false assumption. For virtually all of my adult life, I have wanted a God that is there for me when I want Him, but didn't bother me the rest of the time. I wanted a God that was not involved in my life, except when I wanted Him. I wanted Him to provide me with advice and help with my plans, upon request. This is really a big problem because that isn't who He is any more than you are a physical trainer. If you try to build a relationship based on a false view of who the other person is, then you don't really have a relationship at all. God, as the almighty king of the universe, is not there for my pleasure. He isn't my servant, I need to be His."

"It is truly amazing," Blake continued, "to have Him as your God. What I have learned, is that I must let Him be God over my life. The only way this Christianity will work, is to let Him be in charge, otherwise we are trying to force Him into a mold that just isn't Him."

Andy thought for a moment and said, "Well that might work for you, but I don't think I could ever have that kind of relationship with God."

Blake asked, "Why not?"

Andy looked uncomfortable as he chose his words. "There are some things in my past...and even in my life now that...aren't...well, they aren't good...He wouldn't be impressed."

"Andy, God already knows everything you do and every thought that is in your head and you know what? He loves you anyway. He loves you more than you can possibly imagine. Unlike what many people might tell you, the God of the Bible isn't all about rule-keeping. The most important thing to Him is not whether you toe the mark, it is the relationship you have with Him. The whole reason Jesus died on the cross was to die for our sins – He took our punishment – that leaves those of us that have a

relationship with Him, without any sin. When we have a love-relationship with the Lord, it is as if we are perfect in God's eyes, even though none of us are. When we deserve to burn in hell, God gives us Heaven and blessings; that is what grace is all about."

Andy replied, "Wow. You have gotten into this Christianity stuff. This whole God loves you and grace business has always seemed kinda confusing, but what you said about it makes some sense." At this point they arrived back at the office. As Andy went off in the direction of his desk, he said, "Thanks for explaining that to me."

When Blake got back to his office, he began to pull out some paperwork associated with a project he planned to undertake next. His computer emitted a "bing" sound indicating that he has received an instant message. He woke up the screen to see what the IM was about. It was from Andy. The message said, "Oh crap! Did you see the email?" With a feeling of dread, Blake looked in his inbox for the message that might have generated Andy's comment. There was one labeled, "Announcement" and it was from the regional manager. Blake opened it and began reading.

From the email, Blake learned that the manager of his office, Jim, has been transferred. Jim would be opening a new office in Georgia. This explained why Jim had been off at corporate this week. He read on and learned that the new manager for Blake's office would be Oliver Thomas.

This was really bad. Although Blake had never met Oliver Thomas, he had a reputation throughout the corporation. Behind his back, he was called Ogre Thomas. Everywhere he went, there was flood of complaining, stress and typically an exodus of employees. Blake had always wondered why the company kept him. Now he was coming here! Blake sat back in his chair shaking his head, thinking, "This is terrible!"

He prayed, "Oh Lord! This is the most awful thing! You know I have enjoyed working for the company. I don't want to have to leave, but I don't want to have to go through everything that I have heard about the Ogre. Please help me Lord. Please give me any other manager! What happened Lord? I thought you were going to protect me. Please my God, do what you can to fix this situation."

He pulled out his cell phone and called Mark. "Hey, Mark, do you have a minute."

Hearing the concern in Blake's voice, Mark replied, "Yeah sure. I have a meeting starting in about 10 minutes, but I'm OK to talk right now. What's up?"

Blake said, "You know I've been trying to follow the Lord and I thought I was doing OK, but now I hear that my manager, who is a really good guy, is being transferred out and replaced by the most awful manager in the whole corporation. He has such a reputation that, even though I've never met him, I know that he makes things miserable for the people that attempt to work under him."

"That doesn't sound good." responded Mark.

"I don't know why the Lord has done this to me. I was trying so hard."

"Blake, the Lord hasn't done this to you. The Lord has a master plan and it is good. I don't know what direction He's going to want to take you in, but you have to trust Him. There are times that trusting Him is really hard. For you to wind up where He wants you to be, you have to listen to His voice and just trust that He knows what He is doing. All through the Bible, in many different ways, He says to His people 'Do not be afraid, just trust Me. Even when you can't see it, I have everything under control.' You

need to just trust in the fact that God has your back, then listen to what he want you to do about the situation.”

“Maybe I can trust him. I bet a lot of my co-workers are going to be updating their résumés this afternoon.”

Mark replied, “Just stay calm and pray this through before you do anything drastic. God's plan is better than anything you can think up, so follow His leading.”

Blake said, “That makes me feel better already. Mark, I do appreciate you. Thanks for your help and support.”

“No problem. I'll be praying for you and I'll let Beth know so she can pray for you too. God will take care of you.”

Blake ignored the accumulated email and IM on his computer, heading off to find a couple of uninterrupted minutes with the Lord in the men's room. While the Lord didn't tell him what to do, Blake did find himself feeling better.

Returning to his desk, he found many messages of gloom, doom and panic from his co-workers. The rumor-mill was churning out so much negativity that Blake felt his trust in the Lord slipping. Blake got a sticky note and wrote on it with a marker “TITL” and stuck it to the bottom of his computer monitor to remind himself to trust in the Lord. Each time he noticed it, he shot out a quick, silent prayer of “I am trusting You because you will take care of me.” He tried hard to stay out of the negative discussions.

Blake knew that the ogre...no Oliver (he was trying to remain positive) was due to start on Monday. Knowing that a miracle-working God was going to take care of him, he figured that God was going to drop a job opportunity into his lap any time now.

CHAPTER 15

“How great are His miracles, and how mighty His wonders...”

Daniel 4:3

Blake rang the doorbell at Nikki's house a couple of minutes before seven. There were several cars parked in her driveway and in front of her house. He was a little nervous, just because he wasn't really sure what he was getting into tonight. The door was opened up by a tall, thin man with a goatee who looked like a young college professor.

The man opened the door wide, saying “You must be Blake! Come on in! I'm Steve.”

Behind him was a roomful of various people, young and old, men and women, of wide variety. Nikki came out of a back room and when she saw him gave him a hug. This was the first time Blake had seen her since their initial meeting. She was prettier than he had remembered. He was introduced to each of the people in the room. He met a tall, skinny man with gray hair called Mac. There was a heavy, African-American woman with a big smile and welcoming manner named Trina. He was introduced to Anton, a small blond guy and Mary a dark-haired girl who appeared to be only around 20. There was a dark-skinned man with a thick accent, whose name Blake didn't catch and a very shy-appearing woman in her 50's named Abby or something similar.

Trina made a space next to her for him to sit and started asking him about his church when Nikki asked the group, “Does anybody know if Cathy is going to be

coming?" Somebody apologized that they were supposed to pass on that Cathy had to work late and wouldn't make it. Nikki, then said, "Well it is 7 o'clock so we need to get started."

Blake was a bit surprised to see this starting out promptly at the specified hour. His surprise must have shown on his face, because Trina leaned over and whispered, "Nicole considers it to be part of Godly integrity to start things on time. You know: to do what you say you are going to do."

Nikki was speaking to the group, "Let me give you a quick summary of what is going on with my family and then we'll get on to the important stuff. My sister is Brittany, she is 26 and mother of Sabrina a 2-and-a-half year old. She lives with her current boyfriend which is called 'Ak', yes 'Ak'; don't ask me, I sure don't know what that's about. My sister has been heavily involved with drugs and alcohol for about 12 years. There had been hope when Sabrina was born that a baby might bring her out of the self-focused mode she had been in. Indeed, we had every reason to believe that she was doing much better, not that she was always clean, but that she was much more settled and more in control. A couple of weeks ago, one of my sisters dropped in on her and found Brittany totally zoned out and Sabrina crying because she was hungry.

"My sister took care of the immediate situation, but it was obvious that there was a big problem. This whole situation created a major stir within the family, I have six siblings that all live within 20 miles or so. Every one of them was upset. Somebody called social services, which maybe was a good thing, but the immediate effect was to make Brittany feel betrayed and angry with the family, putting us in a worse position to help her."

Nikki continued, "When the social worker showed up at Brittany's, there wasn't any obvious evidence of problems. She apparently talked to Brittany about the issues and consequences of drug use by parents of small children. Apparently, Brittany denied everything and the social worker asked her if she would submit to a drug test, which she refused. When the social worker tried to tell her about drug treatment options, Brittany lost her politeness and hustled her out the door."

Going on, she said, "So, Brittany is refusing help and trying to raise Sabrina, but also can't seem to stay away from her various chemicals of choice. Her boyfriend is no use, he is rarely there and is pretty continually high."

One of the gals in the room spoke up, "So what do you want us to pray?"

Nikki paused a moment before saying, "More than anything else, Brittany needs the Lord. Right now the chemicals have a strangle-hold on her and she can't see beyond her next high. Sabrina is an innocent victim of Brit's mess, she needs protection. Only the Lord knows whether it would be better for her to stay with her Mom or to be removed from the household. The best outcome would be if Brittany could be freed from her addiction, then she could be the mother that Sabrina needs. God IS able to deliver, so let's pray that God would deliver Brittany from her slavery to the addiction and open her eyes to Him so she can be saved."

Blake was astonished. His view of what they should pray for was much simpler, like 'protect Sabrina' or 'guide the authorities', he would never have dreamed of deliverance and salvation of a drug addict. While he knew that God could perform a miracle in this situation, he almost felt uncomfortable going on the line to ask Him for one.

Nikki asked if anybody else had any questions before they started praying. Nobody did. Everybody stood up and moved toward the center of Nikki's living room so they could join hands. At first, Blake felt out of place and terribly aware of the fact that he was holding hands with 2 virtual strangers, but that quickly faded.

Nikki started with a prayer of praise for God's almighty power. As she prayed, other joined in, praying their own prayers of praise. The prayers flowed out with one prayer supporting another. As one person prayed a thought, one or more people would echo that thought in their own prayers. While it was totally unorganized, it flowed with the beauty of a symphony.

The words being prayed were not the really amazing thing. What really knocked Blake's socks off was the overwhelming presence of the Spirit of God. He had never experienced God's power like this. It was all over and through him. It seemed to swirl around the circle. The Holy Spirit was so tangible and close that Blake could almost taste it. The sense of loving power was unimaginable. Blake knew that their prayers were being heard. He was also positive that Brittany must be affected, wherever she might be tonight.

Even though Blake had not believed he would be participating in the prayer time any more than he had to, he found himself drawn into by the Spirit and power. He found himself praying fervently, just like everybody else, for God to work a miracle in Brittany's life this very night.

He had no idea how long they had been praying when the doorbell rang. The prayer dwindled down to just a couple of people still muttering prayers. Nikki opened the door. At the door was a thin, twenty-something girl who was sobbing, with a preschooler in tow. Blake didn't need introduced, he knew this was Brittany and he knew what (or Who) had brought her. Through her flood of tears, she said, "Please help me get clean."

Nikki brought her into the living room. As if this was what happened every day, we all descended on her like a flock of buzzards on carrion, laying our hands on her and Sabrina and taking up our prayer with renewed vigor. There was an exhilarating air of accentuated faith, since we had already seen obvious evidence of God's hand working through these prayers. Sabrina watched and listened to the prayers with big eyes, but after a few minutes she lost interest and went to sit on the couch and play with a doll she pulled out of somewhere; the praying adults simply closed ranks on Brittany.

Brittany cried. She begged for help. She even prayed. She cried some more.

In time the prayers dwindled down and people began to release their precious hands from Brittany. There was a lot of exhausted and exhilarated hugging. Blake found himself drenched with sweat and his face wet with tears that he wasn't aware he had cried. At first he was embarrassed, until he noticed that there wasn't a dry eye in the place except little Sabrina.

Nikki and Brittany were tightly holding onto one another. Brittany was apologizing for everything and they were mutually expressing love to one another. They moved together to a love seat to talk, never letting go of one another. A couple of the people settled into chairs to pray further. Mary went to talk to and play with Sabrina.

Blake was stunned and dazed with what he had just experienced and the miracle he had just seen. He was just standing there in the middle of the room watching

everything around him, feeling like he had just run, and won, the Boston Marathon. He was exhausted, but so amazingly alive!

Trina came up to him and said quietly, “There are no limits to what God can do! Glory, it is hot in here, what say we go outside to cool off?”

Blake agreed. As they headed for the door, Mac went out ahead of them. Blake was shocked to see that it was completely dark outside. He wondered how long they had been praying. He glanced at the time on his cell phone and realized they had prayed for almost 3 hours! It had seemed like no time at all!

As they got outside, Mac said, “Now that was what I call a good time! I love seeing Jesus at work!”

Trina replied, “Praise His wonderful name! I feel like singing, but I don't think the neighbors would appreciate it.”

Steve walked up and said, “Just imagine them sitting in their houses, watching TV or doing housework, totally unaware that a miracle has happened right here in their midst!”

Mac said, “It's been amazing, but I have to get up early in the morning, so I better go.”

“I would love to hang and bask in the glow, but I better go, too.” said Steve

A few hours earlier, Blake had been uncomfortable with these strangers, but now after what they had experienced together, he enthusiastically returned the offered hugs. It felt like these people were truly his brothers and sisters.

As the men went to their cars, Trina said to him, “So I get the impression that this was a new experience for you.”

Blake spoke with a shake in his voice, “It was. That was so amazing. It was like God was right there in the room with us. I never dreamed of God being so...” Blake searched for a word, “intense.”

Trina said, “The Bible talks about God being like this, but people just don't expect it. Our faith has run down to almost empty. When you expect a useless God, you can't expect this big God to show up.”

“I just can't believe how He answered the prayer right away.”

“Jesus told us over and over again how powerful prayer was. He said things like, 'whatever you ask in My name, I will do it'⁴⁵ and 'ask whatever you want and it will be done for you.'⁴⁶ He wanted us to know prayer is powerful.”

Blake thought a moment and said, “I'm amazed that you don't have people harnessing that sort of power for selfish reasons.”

Trina said, “But it doesn't that way. Remember, this is something that requires faith in God, not faith in me. If I try to pray because I want a fancy car, I'm just seeking stuff for me, it like I am just worshiping myself. When Jesus talks about praying in His name, He meant more than using 'in Jesus name' like magic words. You gotta believe in who He is and what He wants. There is nothing at all, that my Jesus can't do and there's 2 parts to that: my faith and His power. When my faith in Him is real, then His power is right there.”

About that time the remaining guests came out of Nikki's house. Mary has holding Sabrina's hand. She saw Blake's puzzled look and said, “Sabrina is going to come over to my house next door and play for a while and maybe even stay the night

while her Mommy talks to Aunt Nikki.” Mary and Sabrina walked next door while the others made their way to cars.

“She’s not gonna have a easy time, that girl.” said Trina as she nodded toward Nikki’s house and Blake understood she was talking about Brittany.

“But hasn’t God delivered her?”

Trina said, “He has, but does she have what it takes to stay delivered?” she looked down as she continued, “I had a son, Joe, who got messed up in drugs when he was a teenager. He wound up in jail and hooked on crack. My church, we cried out to God, over and over to deliver him from the drugs, but when he got out of jail, he went right on where he left off. One night at our prayer meeting, God answered our prayers and Joe got hit upside the head by the Holy Spirit. At that moment, Joe repented his sinful life and asked to be put into a treatment program. At that point, I thought God had won. Joe sought healing and sought the Lord, but the crack always called to him. It was always a struggle for him: follow crack or follow Jesus. He died in a car accident, but he died with Jesus in his heart. I almost think God took him out of mercy. While I miss him, I hated to see him battling the crack, it was so hard.”

Blake paused, then said, “That is so sad. Those drugs can so ruin a life, so quickly. What do you think will happen to her?” gesturing toward Nikki’s house.

“I don’t know.” Trina answered, “I know God can even eliminate the desire, but I don’t know what that girl is going to do. Nikki is a giant prayer warrior and she loves her sister. She’s going to stay on her knees for the poor thing. That goes a long way.”

“It’s hard to imagine that all that power wasn’t enough to completely heal her.”

Trina said, “I know what you mean, but the devil is crafty. He’s not going to give her up without a fight.”

“Well, I’m going to keep praying for her.” said Blake

“That’s the best thing we can do.” said Trina. “You have yourself a good night.”

“So, you think its OK just to leave them?”

Trina replied, “It’s just a couple of sisters, surrounded by the Holy Spirit, having a long talk. He’s taking better care of them than anything we could do.”

“OK,” Blake said, “you have a good night, too.”

The two new friends hugged, then Blake went to his car. After experiencing the Spirit of God the way he did, he felt on top of the world. As he ran through the evening in his mind, he found himself wishing Elaine had been there. From somewhere, his imagination or God, he couldn’t tell, came the thought, “She was there.” Even though he couldn’t think of any sort of scriptural basis for this idea, it made him feel better.

Tonight’s God experience was so much more like the God that Elaine had known, he felt really close to Elaine, just because he had experienced it. The giant thrill that he felt when the room had filled with God’s Spirit, that must have been a taste of what Elaine experiences in the presence of God, in heaven. He thought, “Wow, to be back with Elaine and to be in the presence of God at the same time, could a single being experience so much joy without just exploding?”

CHAPTER 16

“...Tell about all His wonderful works!” Psalm 105:2

The next morning, Blake woke before the alarm clock went off and found himself singing praise songs as he went through his routine. He couldn't wait to sit down in the prayer closet and spend time with God again. His prayer time was full of praise for God's amazing power of thanksgiving that he was allowed to participate in such a great miracle. With a real sense of expectation, Blake asked the Lord if there was anything that God wanted to say to him. As he sat there waiting on the Lord, he had the idea of reading the second chapter of second Timothy. While he wasn't sure whether the concept might have been from the Lord or just his imagination, he treated it as if it were from the Lord.

He read the chapter, remaining open to whatever the Holy Spirit might want him to see in the scripture. Many of the points in the verses seemed interesting, but they didn't speak to him. As he approached the end of the chapter, he read, "he will be a special instrument, set apart, useful to the Master, prepared for every good work⁴⁷." It was as if the words were somehow highlighted in neon when he read them. He knew that this would be his prayer, that he would actually be useful to God, prepared and available for whatever good work, according to God's plan. He has seen God's incredible power and wanted to see that at work in his everyday life.

As Blake went to work and got into his day, he couldn't stop thinking about how incredibly awesome God was. As he proceeded in his normal work activities, he thought today was like his first day at work after he had met Elaine, where he had something so very special in his life, but nobody else could really appreciate it. Even all the negative talk about the ogre coming couldn't dampen his enthusiasm. He eagerly anticipated having lunch with Andy, so he could share his experience with somebody.

As Andy and Blake began walking to the pizza shop for their lunch, Blake jumped right in, "You would not believe how awesome last night was!"

Andy replied, "I thought you were just going to some boring prayer meeting, but you sound like you met a girl or something."

"That's funny," Blake laughed, "I almost feel like I did when I met Elaine, but that isn't it. The prayer thing I went to was nothing like boring. It was absolutely incredible."

"Really?"

"I have never encountered God in such a powerful way. The group of, I don't know, maybe 9 people all were praying for Nikki's druggie sister. We all stood, held hands and prayed and it was beyond words. It was like God was there in amazing power, right there in the room. I guess we prayed for hours, but it seemed like no time at all had passed. As we prayed for God to take the addiction away from this girl, Nikki's sister showed up at the door in tears and ready to give up her drugs. This unimaginable power had pulled her right out of whatever she had been doing, sliced right through all her justifications that what she was doing was OK, and brought her to Nikki's house with a repentant heart! If that wasn't incredible enough, not one of us was surprised. We prayed, God heard, and it was as good as done. I have never experienced anything like that in all my life."

Andy said, "Let me get this straight, this girl is addicted to drugs and has just been getting worse. You guys pray and suddenly she is ready to give them up?"

Blake grinned, "Yup. God intervened, jumping right in between this gal and the drugs she had been so dependent on. If you had experienced the power that moved in Nikki's living room, you wouldn't have been surprised at anything, but it is still a massive thrill to see the results. Nikki had been so worried about her sister and her niece. To see God move in this situation is just so awesome!"

"You keep talking about the power," asked Andy, "what was that like?"

"Gosh...um...well, I know that there have been a few times when I have prayed when I felt God's presence really obvious. If you take the best of those and multiply it time 50 or 100, then you are getting close. There was something that, like, flowed through our hands as we were joined in a circle holding hands. It was like a current flowing through, but not painful like getting an electrical shock, but still flowing through and around. I don't think I am doing this justice...there just isn't anything I can relate this to. It was like a cross between your first kiss and riding a roller coaster...no it isn't really. It made me feel like anything was possible. It was...I don't know...it was just wild. I can't explain it."

Andy asked, "So these people, were they like ministers or something?"

"I don't really know much about them. I got there just as they were about to start and didn't really have much chance to talk to anybody before we prayed and after we prayed, little details like occupations seemed insignificant. They looked like just regular people. I wouldn't have guessed there was anything particularly unusual about them. They ranged from 20's to maybe 60 years old. There was one foreign looking guy. I was just completely blown away by what happened when this group began to pray. What they must have all had, was a lot of faith."

Andy grinned as he said, "Do think we could get them to pray for me a few million dollars?"

"I don't think it works that way," said Blake. "It's kind of interesting, how it was explained to me. To see answers to prayer, we need to have faith in the real God, our King and Master, like in the Bible. If we are just interested in stuff to make ourselves happy, we don't really have the faith and trust in God, we are worshiping 'self' instead of the real God."

"OK, then, maybe not cash. Do you think they could pray something about the ogre coming, perhaps he could get a better offer. Yes, that's it! We are looking out for his best interest. We want this guy to find a better job, someplace else."

Blake laughed, "I don't think that trying to fool God is a really good plan."

"I guess not," said Andy, "but this whole thing has me concerned. I really don't have any good job prospects, I don't really even want to leave the company. This guy just sounds so awful to work for. Last night I got on a job hunting website. It just seems like anything descent requires relocating. That sounds like a terrible prospect, too."

"I am trying not to worry about it. I believe God will take care of me."

Andy said, "That is either admirable or stupid, but at this point, I don't know which."

That evening, Blake got a call from Nikki, "I just wanted to thank you for praying for Brittany."

Blake asked, "So what has happened since we left last night?"

“It hardly seems like that was just last night.” said Nikki. “Brittany and I sat up and talked and prayed well into the night. We got a few hours sleep, then I drove her down to a Christian rehab farm down below Richmond. They will work on getting her body dried out while re-aligning her faith. They have a good program. While the Lord did an incredible work in her life last night, Nikki has to learn again to rely on God for her strength. That process of reestablishing her faith takes time.”

“So how is she feeling about all this?” asked Blake.

“She is bouncing between being grateful and scared. She seems so much like a child right now, so very vulnerable. This is a big change from the almost arrogant attitude she had a few days ago where she knew she was doing the right thing for herself and it was nobody's business but hers. She has been broken, now God can work in her heart.”

“So what about Sabrina?”

“Last night she stayed with Mary, one of the girls that prayed, who is my neighbor. Then, this morning another sister of mine, Anna, came and got her. Anna has 4 kids. Sabrina will have a good time there.”

Blake asked, “And how are you doing?”

Nikki paused, as if taking stock of how she was doing, “I am tired, but I really feel good. I am positive God has his hand on Brittany. He wants to see Brittany live her life for Him and to raise Sabrina to follow Christ. I am in awe of how good He is.”

“This whole thing has really opened my eyes.” said Blake, “I have seen sides of Him that I never dreamed ever existed.”

Nikki said, “I know what you mean. Even though He tells us everything in the Bible, He still manages to astonish us day after day. It is like we know all these things in our head, but when we experience them, it is totally different. It is like He knows that we can't hold onto our faith, so He has to give us new faith all the time.”

Blake chuckled, “You know what's funny? Not so long ago, I really believed that going to church was what Christianity was all about.”

“There are so many people that are in that boat. It is so sad. It is like living on a diet of plain oatmeal and not recognizing that there is a world of wonderful foods out there.” said Nikki.

“Speaking of which, I always enjoy talking to you, but it was really nice actually seeing you last night. Why don't we get together and have dinner sometime.”

There was a pause on the other end of the line and Nikki finally said, “Blake, I would absolutely love to do that. I really enjoy our phone conversations and I would like very much to get beyond the phone, but I'm going to give you a piece of advice and I'm going to help you follow it. Give it some time. While I know that you are terribly lonely right now, you are also vulnerable. This is not a time to start dating. It would be altogether too easy for there to be very bad consequences from trying to develop a relationship in your current state. Even if you feel like you are healing and ready, you still have an open wound that needs additional healing time. So, yes, I would love to have dinner with you and would like to agree to go out tomorrow, but I'm going to agree to go out in May, after you have had a full year of healing time.”

Blake laughed, “I guess I should have known that I wouldn't get an answer I expected from you. You amaze me. OK, it's a date, you and I going out to dinner, in April. Talk about planning in advance!”

Nikki said, "I hope you're not upset, but I really think it is best for you."

"No, I'm not upset. In some ways I am relieved. You are right about my being lonely, but whenever I think about a woman, as a woman, I feel guilty, like it is wrong or unfaithful to Elaine."

Nikki asked, "So how's your journey going?"

Blake smiled as he said, "My journey, huh? Well, I feel pretty good about it. Of course, last night's experience gave it a big boost. This morning, the Lord led me to a verse in second Timothy that talks about being a special instrument that is useful to the Master⁴⁸. It really spoke to me about needing to make myself useful to God. After seeing what He did for Brittany, I want to see that kind of power working through me to help people."

"That's good," said Nikki, "just make sure that you really want it for Him and on His terms and that you don't have it in mind as anything that brings you glory. That is a trap I have seen people fall into before."

Blake thought for a moment, then said, "I don't think that's what's going on, but I would be lying if I said that personal glory didn't cross my mind."

"Satan will try to corrupt everything that is good," said Nikki "because that's what he does. If God performs a miracle when you pray, you have to remember that He didn't do it because you prayed. Instead, view it as a miracle He performed of His own volition and He allowed you to be a participant in the process. If you are faithful to the Holy Spirit, you will pray about what He wants you to pray about, when He wants you to pray about it. Then, sometimes, He will choose to perform a miracle in association with the prayer. There is an odd relationship between the one who prays and God. While there are some Scriptures that make it sound like God responded just because somebody prayed, for me, that is a dangerous line of thought, because that starts blurring the line between servant and Master. Then, I might start thinking I am significant in this relationship with God. That makes me much too easy a target for Satan. He would have me praying for things that gave me glory and satisfaction, but then I would no longer be a submitted servant of Jesus, I would be unable to do anything for Him. Satan would love that."

"It seems he has temptations around every corner," said Blake.

"Sometimes I think that getting rid of temptations, once and for all, will be the best part of Heaven. It won't really be the best part, but it will be great to never have to fight one off again."

Blake asked, "OK, I'll nibble. What's going to be the best part?"

"That's easy. You remember the sensation while we were praying last night? That was just the tiniest little taste, just a shadow of what it will be like to live in His pure presence."

Blake said, "Wow!"

"Being right in the presence of the Lord is going to be beyond any pleasure we have ever experienced. Revelation says that we won't need any lights in Heaven because his presence will be so bright⁴⁹. I just can't wait."

"I never really thought too much about heaven, past seeing Elaine again," said Blake.

"I don't mean this to minimize your love or anything, but based on what I read, I don't expect that seeing Elaine is going to be the biggest thing; once you actually get there."

Blake said, "That's why I enjoy talking to you, you have this way of opening up my eyes to things I never imagined."

CHAPTER 17

"When I am afraid, I will trust in you" Psalm 56:3

The two men stood outside the church as people stood talking or made their way to their cars. Mark was saying, "You might have this a little backwards in your mind. God does look after you and take care of you, but that doesn't mean that He is going to make your life cushy."

Blake answered, "I know that and I'm not expecting Him to hand me a billion dollars or anything, but surely He isn't going to expect me to work under a boss that is abusive and degrading."

"I don't know exactly what God has in mind here, but remember, the New Testament contains instructions for Christ's followers that are slaves. I would be willing to believe that the life of a first century slave would make your boss seem like a pussy-cat. Are you sure you aren't judging this guy unfairly, you haven't even met him have you?"

"No," Blake replied, "But I have talked to people that have and they all agree that he is a real jerk."

"The problem," said Mark, "is that we usually don't understand what God is doing. He may have in mind that you learn something from working for this guy or God might want him to learn from you. God may be looking for you to lead this guy to Christ. Then again, this guy may not live up to his nasty reputation, he might be a nice, but misunderstood, person."

"From what I have heard, he is anything but nice. Some of the stories sound more like the archetypal bosses of Elizabethan England than modern day management. I'm really not looking forward to going to work tomorrow."

Mark paused, then said, "Blake, sometimes we just have to trust the Lord. There will be times when we just can't see, can't even imagine, what He is doing. To me, one of the real heroes of the Bible was Ananias. God told him to go and heal the most vile and wicked villain of their age and cause. Ananias was sure this must be some sort of a mistake, but to his credit, he was obedient. Ananias set aside his fears in simple trust in God, this action resulted in a huge portion of the New Testament being written. This bad guy in need of healing was, of course, the apostle Paul, at least that's who he was after God got done working on him."

Mark continued, "There have been times in my own life when it looked like God was sending me into the lion's den. In each of those cases, I had two choices: I can do what I want or I can trust that He has the perfect plan. You know what? When we trust Him in those cases when we really want to run the other way, this grows us in Him."

Blake frowned, "Why can't He just inject us with God Growth Hormone or something instead of going through stuff like this?"

Mark laughed, “That would be too easy! Look at this as an opportunity to be used by God.”

Blake thought of how he had been praying that he would be “a special instrument, set apart, useful to the Master, prepared for every good work.”⁵⁰ Perhaps this was simply an answer to his own prayer. Maybe God did have a work for Blake with his new boss. As Blake thought this through, he decided that He would give God and the ogre... no...he wasn't going to call him that...he would give Oliver every possible chance. Perhaps this guy just needs somebody that cares. Blake said, “I guess you're right. I'll try.”

Mark said, “That's good, but keep in mind, your greatest effort isn't even close to being as powerful as God. You need to be praying for your new boss, and for yourself in this situation. If I had to guess, you are going to have some challenges ahead of you. If it is God's will that you do some sort of work in this situation, then He will supply His power to carry out His plan, but if you take it off in your own direction, you'll be on your own. There will be a lot of temptation to work this for your own advantage or to let your anger ruin everything. You will have to be prayed up to stay on His track.”

Blake said, “Huh. I never thought of doing his will in that way, but what you say makes sense. I guess everything that's important has temptations to get off His track. That being the case, then He would be the only protection that makes any sense.”

“You certainly need to enter into your work environment well prayed-up.” Mark said, “I don't know what God has in mind for you in this situation, but I'm sure it would be easy to just follow everybody else's example, instead of following God's plan. God's plan isn't usually the easiest choice. When everybody around you is complaining and panicking, what they are saying will seem more reasonable than listening to some whisper from God that you should do something different.”

“I guess I have already seen some of that. The sense of fear around the office is really infectious.” said Blake.

Mark said, “Trusting in God is easy when life is cushy, but when everybody is around you is losing their heads, it is tough to keep your head focused on Him.”

“I guess I have no real choice but to try. I would appreciate your prayers.” said Blake.

“You can be confident that I will be praying for you. God is a powerful God. He can do all things. You can trust in His power and wisdom.”

CHAPTER 18

*“It is not by sword or spear that the Lord saves, for the battle is the Lord's.”
1 Samuel 17:47*

Blake felt like a spider that had just been stomped upon. This was a Monday of Mondays. He woke, full of trepidation about his day. While he had hoped for amazing insights, hope or an escape in his morning prayer time all he received was a tiny dose of peace, a tiny dose that quickly evaporated.

When he came out to his car, he found he had a flat tire, “Of all days to have a flat!” he thought as he worked frantically to put the spare tire on. The delay to his regular routine put him in much heavier traffic than he was accustomed. With every stop and delay, he could feel his fear growing.

He finally walked into work late, but found the place strangely deserted. He heard sounds coming from the meeting room and realized that Oliver must have called a company meeting first thing, on his first day. Blake attempted to slip in, but Oliver interrupted what he was telling the group to say, "You, there, coming in at 8:22 in the morning, did you enjoy your extra sleep? Come to my office as soon as we are done here, to discuss tardiness and what you missed."

Then Oliver continued his dissertation of new rules. He did not want any cell phones in the building. When Scott objected saying that he had company email on his cell phone, Oliver asked and wrote down the Scott's name, then asked him if he had email on his desktop computer. When Scott said he did, then Oliver said Scott had email access while he was here, he didn't need a cell phone.

Oliver explained that the corporate computer use policy forbids the use of the company computers for non-business purposes. He was going to be having meetings with the IT staff about how to implement rigorous monitoring for non-business use. There will be no looking at Facebook, Internet shopping, checking out the sports scores or sending emails to all your friends. Employees should immediately contact (without using company computers or cell phones) anyone that sends them non-business emails and have them stop. While he would like to make an exception to allow the weak employees, that can't take it, to job hunt online, that would be inconsistent with the policy, so that is forbidden, too. Oliver explained that we are here to work and all these distractions have no place in the business environment. He explained to them that if they want non-business computer usage and cell phones in the workplace, there are plenty of other employers that allow it, however, in this office they are going to work.

He continued to explain how he was going to monitor each person's work. He had many years of experience in different roles of this company and he will share with each department the most effective ways to do their jobs. He explained that each person was in the habit of doing their jobs their own way, but he will standardize how everybody does their jobs for greater efficiency.

Ignoring the fact that this office was already one of the top-performing offices in the company, he told the assembled group that their level of performance has been lousy compared to what they can be doing. He wasn't here to make friends, he was here to yank this office up to a higher level of productivity.

Blake was shocked. After 5 years of working under good, kind and compassionate management, this jerk was totally unexpected. Blake was fuming.

As the meeting broke up with most people in stunned silence, Blake made his way to his office to check-in, before going to Oliver's office. He was half hoping for an emergency to crop up that would delay his meeting. He found no emergency waiting for him. What he did find was Elaine's face looking at him out of the photo on his desktop. He whispered to her, "What am I going to do?" Almost as if she answered him, he knew he should pray. He closed his door and knelt in front of his visitor chair. "Oh, Lord my God, I really, really need you! I don't know what this is all about, but I do know I'm going to need your strength. Please fill me with your Spirit, so Your peace will be restored in me. I want to do your will, but if there is any way that you could get me out of here, I would appreciate it. For the time I am here, I am going to need You in Your fullness. As I go to this meeting with Oliver, please fill me with your peace and control

my emotions so I don't do anything I might regret. Oh, and Lord, please work in Oliver's life, so he might know you peace and compassion. Thank you for everything. Amen.”

With that he stood up and headed to Oliver's office. He poked his head in and said, “You wanted to see me?”

Oliver replied with, “Come in, take a seat. What is your name?”

As Blake walked into what had so recently been Jim's office he was astonished by the transformation. Where the office had been adorned with family pictures and memorabilia of a life well lived, it was now stark with the only adornment being signs extolling the virtues of hard work. He said, “I am Blake Jacobs.”

As Oliver flipped through pages in a legal pad covered in writing, he said, “I have no use for employees that can't be at work on time. Tardiness is usually a strong indicator of a lazy person. If a person can't get out of bed in the morning they generally can't motivate themselves to do good work either.”

Blake said, “I am always on time, I had a flat tire this morning.”

Oliver answered skeptically, “I'm sure you did. Some people always have an excuse.” He found what he was looking for in his notes. “Uh huh, that is why your name sounded familiar. You have missed almost 10 weeks this year.”

Blake was starting to get angry, “My wife died.”

Oliver responded, “I know your type,” in a mocking voice he said, “poor little Blake, he has had a hard time, you can't expect him to follow the rules.”

Blake wanted to scream at the guy. He was positively furious. Instead he shot up a quick prayer for God's help. A moment later he was able to say with a smile that was only slightly forced, “I guess it will be my job to demonstrate that your assumptions are totally false.”

He was rewarded by a brief flash of surprise across Oliver's face. In that moment, Blake realized that Oliver had been trying to make him lose control. When Blake maintained control, he had avoided being relegated to a lower status.

The two men eyed one another. Blake saw that Oliver was about 6 and a half feet tall with broad shoulders and blunt features. He had the build of an ex-athlete. His nose looked like it had been broken (Blake would love to hear that story!). Oliver continued to drill into him with his dark gray eyes. Blake continued to smile. Finally Oliver said, “You go right ahead, prove me wrong.”

From there, Oliver asked Blake to brief him on various accounts, as if that is why Blake was there. Blake knew, that with God's help, he had won a victory. While he wasn't happy with having this man as his boss, he realized that God would get him through. After he left Oliver's office he realized that his co-workers did not have the same benefit. As he walked back to his own office, he heard snippets of hushed conversation involving words and phrases that were not a part of the normal office conversation. People were angry to the point of threats. Blake felt compassion for his co-workers.

When Blake returned to his desk and began looking at emails, he felt his sense of peace evaporate. Every message that had its origins in the Branch Manager's office undermined his peace and replaced it with anger. He was having instant messaging disabled immediately, each employee needed to sign an acknowledgement that all email and phone calls are subject to monitoring, each employee was expected to submit a

detailed record of how they spent their time, hour-by-hour through the work day and even more.

It was as if Oliver did not believe that they knew how to do their jobs and had to be shown, even though this location had been one of the most successful operations in the company. Oliver felt insulted. He could feel his grasp on the Lord slipping away as his anger swelled. He began praying, thinking in the back of his mind that Oliver might be really good for his prayer life.

CHAPTER 19

"Nor should we complain as some of them did, and were killed by the destroyer."

1 Corinthians 10:10

Blake and Andy sat at a wobbly table in a Chinese fast food restaurant. As Andy ranted about the new boss, Blake could feel his tenuous grasp on peace getting away from him. Soon, Blake was complaining right alongside Andy.

As they were beefing about everything related to Oliver, Blake noticed a girl sitting down across the restaurant. This gal reminded him of Becky. Although this girl had many of the same delicious curves and similar hair color, she certainly wasn't Becky. He had managed for a week or more not to even think of Becky, but here was a similar girl that brought it all flooding back. He made a half-hearted effort to send the improper thoughts out of his mind, but nothing happened, so he continued to watch this girl as he and Andy complained to one another.

Then, Andy asked him how his one-on-one meeting with Oliver had gone. As Blake remembered the victory that God had delivered, he shot a quick prayer up to his Lord which allowed him to regain focus, and then said, "It was really kind of odd. After the big meeting, I stopped by my office and it was almost like I heard a voice telling me I needed to pray. When I arrived in Oliver's office, he started right in on me. It was like he was using anything and everything, including Elaine's death, to make me so angry that I would lose control. I was sitting there with anger filling me, when suddenly something...I don't know...the Holy Spirit came over me. It was like tossing a wet blanket over a fire, because the anger suddenly lost all of its venom. By the power of God, I was able to respond calmly. When I stayed calm, it really seemed to shock Oliver. He knew I should be screaming, but instead I was smiling. This was not the meeting he was expecting. It was like I had won some sort of a victory. After that, he just went on about various accounts, but we both knew that he was just filling in with useless stuff."

Andy was open-mouthed. "How in the world did you manage that? I came out of the employee meeting mad enough to bite through an I-beam."

"That's the amazing thing," replied Blake, "I didn't do anything. One moment I am furious, and the next I am in control and know just what to say. I was as astonished as he was, but at least I know where it came from."

"And God did this?"

"Yes. I can't explain it any other way."

"Huh." said Andy, "Maybe I should be praying more."

"I am totally in awe of what He has been doing in my life. I never realized what I was missing out on. I really missed out on a lot, and I didn't even know it." As he said

this, the two guys at the next table stood up to leave. Blake checked the time on his phone, and said, "We better go. We don't want to be late." Then, as they got ready to go, he continued, "The odd thing, is that the more I depend on God, the more dependable He seems. When I count on Him, He is there for me in ways that I never would have expected a year ago." As they passed right by her table, Blake never gave the girl he had been watching another glance or thought.

Blake watched the clock move, with agonizing slowness, toward 5 o'clock. Blake was immensely happy that it was Friday and that it was only 11...no 10 minutes until the weekend. This had been a tough day, topping off a hard week. He found it hard to believe that he had been working for Oliver for only 2 weeks.

He was thinking that perhaps the old saying of "time flies when you are having fun" should have a corollary of "time crawls when you work for Oliver." He would never have imagined how his job had changed. He would never have imagined how his attitude about his job had changed. Blake had gone from enjoying his job to dreading going to work each morning.

He saw several people leave for new jobs. He knew of at least one person that just walked out without any new job lined up. He suspected that he was the only person in the office that didn't have his resume out on the street, except maybe Oliver. Although Blake had prayed and prayed about it, God hadn't given him any indication that he was supposed to leave. God also hadn't given him any special purpose to serve. So Blake kept doing his best to keep his head down and his spirits up.

He wondered what Elaine would say about his current situation. While he felt closer to the Lord than he had ever been before, he also felt like God was ignoring his job situation. He was trying hard to walk with the Lord, but he knew that his job was challenging his faith and joy. Elaine was always so upbeat and optimistic. As he thought of her, a sense of missing her terribly flooded over him, like a water main had just burst next to him.

Perhaps this weekend he would find comfort and answers.

CHAPTER 20

*"Therefore, through Him let us continually offer up to God a sacrifice of praise."
Hebrews 13:15*

Blake parked his car in front of Nikki's house. There were several cars already there. As he got out, he heard gospel music leaking out of the open windows. A car pulled up behind his and Trina waved at him. He waited for her to get out. She came and grabbed him in a big hug, saying, "Blake sweetie, how've you been doing?"

"I'm good, Trina, how about you?"

"The Lord just keeps dumping blessings I don't deserve, right on top of me. So, you've been talking pretty regular to Miss Nikki, I hear." Winking she said, "she likes you pretty good."

"Well, I like her real well, too. She's a very special person."

"So, are you going to ask her out? I think she'd go with you."

"Ms. Trina, we already have a date scheduled...in May."

Trina stopped her walking up toward the house and turned to face Blake. "May? Are you messing with me?"

Blake really didn't want to bring up Elaine right now. He was still stinging with the feelings of missing her. To avoid talking about it, he said, "The timing was Nikki's idea."

Trina went up the porch steps saying, "I'm going to have to have a talk with that girl. She can't let a good one like you get away."

The front door was open and they could see several faces chatting away happily. Trina stepped through the door saying loudly, "Hi everybody!" A chorus of voices responded with, "Hi Trina!", "Well look what the cat dragged in!", "Blake, welcome!" and "Hi, guys!"

Nikki had described this evening as a celebration of what the Lord was doing in the life of Brittany, her sister. The whole feeling was completely different than the last time he had been here. At his last visit to Nikki's home, everybody had been very serious, knowing there was work to be done. In contrast, this really felt like a celebration.

As Blake scanned the room, he saw many of the people that had been here to pray a few weeks ago, along with a few unfamiliar faces. Blake was looking for Nikki, but she was not in the room. Trina and Blake were quickly directed to the kitchen to get snacks. In the kitchen they found an impressive array of snack foods. At the table was Sabrina, Nikki's niece, her hair in exceedingly cute pigtails, and Nikki leaning over her setting a plate of snacks within her reach.

Nikki looked up. Seeing Blake, she quickly came to him to give him a hug and a kiss on the cheek, saying, "Thank you so much for coming." and greeted Trina with a fond hug.

Sabrina said, "Hi, Ms. Trina. You want a cookie?" Holding out a half-eaten cookie, while holding another one in her other hand.

Nikki speaks to her, "Sabrina, say hello to Mr. Blake." gesturing toward Blake.

"Hi, Mr. Blake. Did you help pray my Mommy all better, too?"

"Yes, Sabrina, I have been praying for your Mommy. I've been praying for you, too. Has it been OK while your mommy has been gone?"

"I have fun with Cody and Becca, but I hope Mommy comes home soon."

Nikki explained, "Cody and Becca are her cousins. Most of the time she has been staying at their house."

Blake started gathering a few snacks with Sabrina providing guidance on which things were good and which ones were yucky. Blake took her advice on the cookies, but took some guacamole against her advice. Trina grabbed a drink and went back into the living room.

Nikki asked Blake, "So, are things any better at work?"

"No, it is really dragging me down. I hate to go into the office, and I can't get it out of my mind when I'm not there. It is just eating at me like a cancer. I'm afraid it is making me a grouch."

Nikki frowned, "That's sad. I had hoped it would get better. I was praying for you and thinking about your dilemma. I know that you want to do God's will, but when you aren't hearing from him, you don't know what to do. I know it is always hardest to hear God's voice on something you have a strong opinion on. Right now you want to

escape from your job and it even seems like the most reasonable answer, but if you did have God's quiet whisper saying, 'Blake, you need to stay and minister to your co-workers.' then it would be immensely easy to dismiss that as another weirdo idea that flashed through your mind."

Nikki continued, "With that in mind, I was thinking about the Biblical examples of people being guided by God. I got thinking about Paul as he made his journeys telling people about Christ. I don't think God told him every turn to make. Paul used the mind that God gave him, but also remained open to the voice of God. There were several times that God changed his mind, telling him to go someplace or not to go to another."

Blake asked, "So, your saying that if I have listened for God and he didn't tell me not to go find another job, then I should use my own judgment?"

"Well," said Nikki, "the tough part is that you have a strong personal opinion and that might cloud your listening ability. I think you need to be positive that you have given God a fair chance. I think you should be able to honestly pray, 'not my will, but thine' over the situation. Then, if you still haven't heard from God, you can start following your judgment, but be prepared to hear Him all along the process, because you never know when He will have a specific opinion."

"I have been trying hard to have that 'not my will, but thine' attitude about the job. That's why I am one of the only ones without a resume on the street."

Nikki replied, "Well, don't let not hearing from God be an excuse for inactivity. A person can't say, 'Because God didn't tell me what to eat today, I'm not going to eat.', that would be silly. God communicates and guides us in what He considers important, but His idea of 'important' rarely aligns with our idea of 'important'."

"That's a really interesting concept," said Blake. "That is exactly what I was doing. I was taking no action, because God hadn't told me what to do..."

Sabrina interrupted with, "Oh-oh please."

Although Blake was baffled by the meaning of the utterance, Nikki got the plate of Oreos and let Sabrina get one, saying to her, "OK, this is your last cookie."

Anton came in the kitchen and spoke to Nikki, "Mac and Kelly are here, I think that's everybody."

Nikki spoke to Sabrina and Blake, "Let's go out in the living room and tell everybody about how your Mommy is doing, then you can come back and finish your cookie."

Sabrina said, "OK, I done now."

They went into the living room and got everybody's attention. Somebody turned off the music. Nikki said, "Thanks to all of you for coming. The main purpose for this get-together is to celebrate what God has been doing in the life of my sister Brittany. I know that each of you have been praying for her and I am very grateful for that. A little over two weeks ago, while a group of us were gathered for the express purpose of praying for her, God, in his incredible mercy, convicted her of the wrongness of the path she was on. Our prayer time was interrupted by her showing up at the door in tears of repentance."

Nikki continued, "The next morning we went out to the Elijah Center up in the mountains. They are a very good, Christ-centered addiction treatment center. Brittany went in there with a little fear, but almost an excitement about the possibility of being freed of her addiction. The staff at the center has kept me updated every couple of days.

We have been thrilled to hear how open she has been to the center's actions, even in the midst of her body going through terrible withdrawals. But, the most exciting part has been how she has sought the Lord. She has exhibited a huge appetite for all things Jesus. She has read Scripture, prayed and asked about a thousand questions about the Lord.

"Then, this last Wednesday, came the most exciting news of all. In an unusual exception to protocol, they allowed Brittany to call me herself to share the news: she was wanting to be baptized." Nikki began to tear up, but continued to share, "It was her desire to make a visible sign of the commitment she had made to the Lord the night before. Brittany's greatest desire was to make Jesus Lord of her life. She never wanted drugs to rule her life again, she wanted and needed a good Master, both for herself and for little Sabrina here. God had done an incredible work in her. This kind of turn-around was barely even imaginable a month ago. I am so very, very grateful to the Lord for His work, for His mercy, His love and His power."

There was a chorus of "Thank you Lord", "Hallelujah", "Praise the Lord" and "Amen" throughout the room.

Nikki said, "God is so good".

The people responded with, "All the time."

"And all the time," said Nikki.

"God is good." said everybody in the room. This lead immediately into the singing of a series of praise choruses. Everybody was having a great time giving God glory and thanks.

After a time Nikki announced, "By the way, we have something else to celebrate, tomorrow is Blake's birthday."

Blake was completely surprised that she knew he was turning 34 tomorrow. It then occurred to him that he knew her birthday was in December, so maybe they had discussed birthdays.

Steve said, "Well, happy birthday, Blake. What are you going to be doing to celebrate?"

"I don't know if it is exactly a celebration," replied Blake, "but I when I leave here I am headed to a prayer retreat with folks from my church."

Unlike Blake, many of these people had participated in prayer retreats before. The conversation was now off on a new track.

CHAPTER 21

"I will listen to what God will say; surely the Lord will declare peace to His people..."
Psalm 85:8

Blake sat on a bench along a trail in a forested area. If he looked in the right direction he could see a bit of the roof of the retreat center through the trees. It was remarkably quiet. The loudest thing was the sound of the trees as the wind blew through. Blake should have been calm and relaxed, but somehow he felt uneasy.

For the next hour, the prayer retreat participants we supposed to seek God on their own. Blake looked around, half expecting to see somebody coming, or a bear or something. He wasn't sure what he was expecting. He couldn't find anything more threatening than a black ant on the toe of his shoe. He started to brush it off, but he

watched it for a moment. He thought about this ant, going about his business and so totally unaware of the wants, desires and needs of the huge creature in his presence. It was silly to think that the ant could understand Blake's thoughts.

As Blake watched the ant move off his foot and down onto the dirt, Blake realized that he was supposed to be communicating with a being that he couldn't comprehend any more than the ant could comprehend him. At that moment the whole idea of prayer seemed ludicrous. How in the world could he even talk to God?

Even as he posed the question, the answer came to him. Unlike with the ant-human relationship, God loves him. God has come down to him. God desires a relationship with him. Furthermore, God knows him, knows his mind, because God created him. While God could treat him the way humans treat ants, He has chosen to seek a relationship with His people. Without God, with His power and love, seeking the relationship, it would be as fruitless as an ant trying to talk to him.

He began to pray, "Oh my Lord, my God, I thank you so much that you love me. I don't know why you would love me the way You do. I think You and Elaine are the only ones that have ever really loved me. Lord, after the childhood I had, I thought nobody would ever love me, but then you gave me Elaine. Through Elaine I really learned what love was really about. While I still miss her so much, I now know about the incredible miracle of the love you have for me.

"I don't feel like I have much to offer you in return but my love and my life. Lord, I give you my life. Take it and use it for your purposes, and your kingdom. I surrender to you everything I have. Take my job, my home, my thoughts, my money, my friends, my time and my body. Everything I value is on the table for you, Lord. My life doesn't seem to have much value, but I give it to you. Perhaps you can do something with it. I want to serve you more than anything else. I want to be a part of your kingdom. Allow me to serve you in whatever way I can.

"Lord, I am so sorry for the times I am unfaithful. I am sorry for the times I seek the interests of Blake instead of your interests. I am so sorry for the times that I doubted you. I am so sorry for the times that my faith was inadequate, and I worried or got depressed. You, Lord, are good and faithful. There is nothing that You can't do. Your love goes on and on, without fail. I am so grateful that you are a patient God and that you never gave up on me.

"Lord, I ask that your blessings might rest on Mark and Beth, on Nikki, on Andy, he really needs you, and on Bob and Pat. Please take care of my Elaine. Also Lord, I hadn't even thought of her for a long time, but if my mother is still living, help her to know that real joy is to be found in You and can never be found in a bottle.

"I thank You for giving me the wonderful gift of love. Even when I never knew what it was all about, You showed me. Even when I never deserved it, You mounted a wooden cross and died to prove your love to me. Lord, how can I show my gratitude? What can I do to even repay a bit of my debt to You? How can I serve you? Please speak to me. Please make yourself clear, because I'm not very good at listening to you."

With that, Blake sought to empty his mind of everything but the Lord God and waited. When other thoughts tried to intrude into his mind, he fought to focus on God alone. Out of nowhere, he found himself thinking about Mr. Maras, a middle school teacher that had a tremendous effect on Blake's life. This man had taught so much more than geometry, but in a crazy way had reached out to touch the lives of his students.

With a small fondness of the memory, Blake pushed that thought out of his mind to focus on Jesus. He thought of Jesus on the cross, what would that Jesus tell him? His mind shifted from Jesus on the cross to Jesus sitting teaching a group of men, molding and forming them with his teachings. Almost superimposed over this image came a picture of Mr. Maras helping form his students in the classroom. Blake forcibly pushed this thought out of his mind and continued to wait on the Lord to speak to him.

After a bit, Blake, gave up on hearing from the Lord right now. He read some Psalms, praying some verses to the Lord as it felt appropriate to do so. Soon it was time to return to the retreat center. As he got up to walk back toward the retreat center, he was startled to see a doe and fawn at the edge of the woods, they couldn't be more than 30 feet away. Blake and the deer stared at one another for an exaggerated moment, before the deer bounded back into the woods. As a city boy, Blake was thrilled to have seen the deer so close to him. He found himself whispering, "Thank you so much Lord. That was wonderful. You are an awesome God and the author of a beautiful creation."

With a bounce in his step, Blake continued toward the retreat center building. He thought of how the doe was taking care of the fawn, teaching it about dangerous things (like him). He had missed out on most of the parental guidance that many kids take for granted. He knew that there were many kids today, where their parents don't have the time or the desire to nurture them. Mr. Maras had come into his life at a critical time, helping provide essential love and support.

There had been a time, when Mr. Maras had been in his life, that Blake had dreamed of becoming a teacher. What this one teacher had managed to do in Blake's life was so precious that Blake had seen it as a heroic profession.

Suddenly Blake stopped walking, closed his eyes and said out loud, "Lord, is that what you were trying to tell me? Do you want me to resurrect that dream? Do you want me to teach?" While Blake didn't get any obvious response, this whole idea had an odd feeling of 'rightness'. He vowed to continue praying about this idea, to determine whether this might really be from God.

CHAPTER 22

*"After the earthquake there was a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire there was a voice, a soft whisper."
1 Kings 19:12*

Blake remembered very little about the rest of the morning sessions. His mind was not on the retreat activities, he was dazzled by the possibilities and impossibilities of a sudden career change. He was both terrified and excited by the whole concept, but he was also very concerned that he had put 2 + 2 together to equal 5. Was God really speaking this to him?

Finally the lunch break came around. Mark came over to him and asked, "Blake, are you alright? You don't seem to be with the program."

Blake looked hopefully at Mark, "Maybe you can help. While we were having the individual quiet prayer time this morning, I think God might have given me a major life direction, but I'm not sure. Maybe I just jumped to conclusions about what it was all about. Perhaps I'm just putting words into God's mouth."

“OK, let's sit down here.” Mark gestured to a couple of chairs nearby, “First, you need to ask yourself whether this 'command from God' sounds like a great idea.”

Blake thought, “Well it might be something that would be OK, but it is scary as anything.”

“That is a good sign,” said Mark, “generally if it sounds like a really great idea, it may not have come from God. It is usually a good evaluation to see if the 'command' will benefit you in any way. That benefit may be in the form of money, prestige, status, power or even in relationships. Any time the 'command' generates benefits for the individual, then they need to be extra, extra cautious with it. In your specific situation, I would guess that this instruction which might be from God involves leaving your unhappy work situation?”

Blake replied sadly, “Yeah. So I guess that means it wasn't from God, huh?”

“I can't really say.” said Mark, “What it does mean is that you just have to be extra careful. The devil loves to impersonate God, by injecting some appealing idea and letting people believe it was God that sent it. So you need to be careful with the idea. The next thing you need to do is to carefully consider whether the idea is consistent with God's word and character. God is never going to tell you to do something that is wrong. For example, He won't tell you to how to take revenge on somebody or to leave your wife for another woman or anything like that.”

“I can't really see this idea as being contrary to God or the Bible,” said Blake, “but even so, I'm not sure whether it came from God or not.”

Mark responded, “That's not so uncommon. Unless it is something that you have act on immediately, just keep praying about it. If it is not from God, it will lose its luster when you keep praying about it. If it is from God, it will begin to get even bigger in your mind.”

“I don't guess it is anything that I need to act on immediately, so I suppose I can do that.”

Mark said, “My personal suggestion would be to do your best to not think too much about it and try not to work out details. I remember once I had this maybe-from-God idea come into my mind and while I was waiting for it to be more obvious whether it was from God, I worked and worked on it. I reached a point that I knew it wasn't from God, but I had already grown attached to it. Giving it up wasn't very pretty.”

Blake frowned, “Not having to run with this is a relief, but I have to admit, I am a bit disappointed. On the one hand, it would have been exciting to start doing God's work. Then, too, I feel a little...well...inadequate, that I don't know whether that was God speaking or not.”

“Well, don't.” said Mark, “If you remember Gideon⁵¹ from the Bible, he wasn't sure if he had heard from God or not. He went to some pretty crazy lengths to make sure it was God who had called him. I'm not sure he makes a very good model of how to deal with God's communications, but he does make it clear that sometimes even the heroes aren't positive if a word came from God or someplace else.”

Blake asked, “Was Gideon the guy with the fleece and the dew and all?”

“That's the guy.”

About that time one of the retreat coordinators asked them, “Are you gentlemen going to have some lunch?”

Blake and Mark got up saying, “Yes. I guess we should.”

As Blake parked his car in the lot beside the church, he looked for Andy's car. As he did so, he thought about how surprised and pleased he had been when he received a call from Andy during his drive home from the retreat last night. Andy had said, "I've been thinking about my spiritual condition and I'm just not sure that my church is really providing the tools to help me get to the next level. I was thinking about joining you at your church tomorrow."

Although the church experience at Calvary Gospel had been a little disconcerting to Blake on his first visit, he had come to appreciate how the true faith of this little church and how it was focused on being faithful to Jesus. The church he used to attend, and Andy still attended, did a lot of playing to the crowd in comparison. This little church didn't shy away from issues that made people uncomfortable, but approached each with faith that the Lord would use His word, faithfully taught, to accomplish His will. More important than all those things, this was a praying church, they truly believed that prayer was essential and powerful.

Blake pulled open the door to the church, scanning over the little clusters of people standing talking in the lobby area. He spotted Mark and Beth chatting with an unfamiliar looking woman. Mark was always good at spotting visitors and making them feel at home. Blake began to wander that direction, saying "Good Morning" to a few people along his path. Then he heard somebody call his name, he turned and saw Pastor David heading in his direction.

David said, "Good morning, Blake. How are you doing this morning?"

Blake thought this was a bit odd. Although Blake liked his Pastor well enough, he had only had a few conversations with him in the years he had been attending this church. He said, "I am doing fine, David. I'm just coming off the high of the prayer retreat. How are you doing?"

"I saw your name on the list of the people attending the retreat and started asking around. From what I hear, the Lord has been doing some major work in your life, building up your faith."

Blake wasn't sure what to say. Smiling he said, "I guess he found some cracks in my basic stubbornness. Seriously though, He has been working on me. He has opened my eyes to a lot of things that I had no clue about."

"Usually when somebody in the church is going through a period of growth, I am more aware of it. I feel bad that I wasn't there to help you along the way, somehow it just slipped right past me."

Blake wasn't sure exactly what this was all about. He said, "This was a case when the Lord provided exactly what was needed and had it well under control."

At this point, Andy walked up saying, "Morning, Blake."

Blake said, "Hi, Andy. Glad you could make it. Andy, this is our Pastor, David Groves." To David he said, "David, this is Andy Renfro, a friend and co-worker of mine."

David shook his hand and said, "Hi Andy, good to meet you. I don't think I've seen you around before, is this your first visit to Calvary Gospel?"

Andy replied, "The last time I was here was when Blake and Elaine were married and I don't think that counts."

David said, "Well, I'm glad you came today." He then turned toward Blake and said, "Blake, I just wanted to say that I'm sorry that you kinda slipped under my radar and I wasn't there to help you, but if you need anything, don't hesitate to call." Then, looking at both of them saying, "If you gentlemen will excuse me, there is a wild rumor going around that I will need to preach today."

As David moved away from them, Andy leaned over to Blake and said, "That was a little awkward, what was that about?"

"I'm not really sure." Blake looked up at the people moving toward the sanctuary and the wall clock, saying, "I guess we ought to head on in."

As they went into the sanctuary and toward the left-front area where Blake usually sat, they found Mark and Beth sitting there with the woman they had been speaking to in the lobby. Blake slid into the row with Andy following him. Blake said, "Andy, you remember Mark and Beth Harman?" To Mark and Beth he said, "You guys remember my co-worker, Andy?"

Mark gave Andy a warm handshake, saying, "Sure, I remember Andy. You're the computer guy, right? I am glad to see you again." Mark gestured to the new face and said, "This is Courtney Smithers, she is visiting for the first time." There were handshakes and greetings all around.

The musicians began to sing, indicating services were beginning. The various conversations hurriedly ended and people moved back to their seats.

It was an excellent service. The Spirit was thick in the church. The worship was full of praise. Blake thought the people were very focused on God today and God was responding. The sermon spoke to Blake's soul.

David preached about the Lord's Prayer, specifically about, "Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."⁵² He said that in heaven the angels live to serve God. Whatever He wants, whatever His will is, the heavenly angels jump to it. David took the point that this should be our goal, to jump to whatever God in Heaven wants, just like the angels do. The sermon explained that this is God's kingdom, when we allow God to be king over our lives, letting him lead and direct us. David explained that when we work for somebody very powerful on their behalf, we can use some of their power to get their work done. The same concept applies when we are doing God's kingdom work on earth, His power is behind us. The early church was extremely tuned to doing the will of God, as a result, they found God's power working hand-in-hand with them, to achieve amazing results. God's kingdom grew incredibly in depth and breadth, just because a few people truly allowed God to be God in their lives.

After church, several people met at the mall food court for lunch. As Blake and Andy came to the tables that Mark had pulled together, they found Mark and Beth on one side of the tables and Courtney opposite them. Blake pulled out a chair next to Courtney and was surprised that Andy, instead of sitting next to him, was taking the seat on the other side of Courtney. Blake watched Andy smile and speak to Courtney and realized that he had an interest in more than just looking for an empty chair.

As they all got talking, Blake's ears perked up when he heard that Courtney was a teacher. He immediately wondered if having Courtney show up today was God's way of confirming that he was supposed to go into teaching. Blake learned that she was a technology teacher in a local high school. Blake was slightly disappointed by this news,

because he had hoped that she might be a middle-school teacher, but Andy was thrilled to learn that she worked with computers.

Blake asked, "So, how did you wind up in teaching?"

"My sister is 2 years older than I am. When she started kindergarten, we would play school. She always got to be the teacher and I was the student. I guess I was jealous, because I decided that I wanted to be a teacher. After that, I flirted with a few different occupation ideas, like becoming an author or doing some sort of computer work, but I always came back to teaching. After I got my teaching degree, I found this position of teaching computer skills to high schoolers and I knew I had found my place. It was like God had made the position exactly for me."

"So we keep hearing stories of how public schools try to quash anything Christian. How do your faith and your job get along?" asked Blake.

Courtney thought for a moment and said, "That's a good question. My principal is a Christian and as supportive as she can be, but we have to exist within the system. While I can't be blatant and obvious, my students aren't dumb, so they know I am a Christian. Every week or so, I have some student come to me about something not school related, sometimes asking for me to pray about their situation and sometimes asking me for advice. I think they know that I love them and they respond to that. Some of them don't get much love in their lives. There are a few that have kept in touch after their graduation; with them I can certainly be a lot more open about my faith."

The conversation wandered away and Blake drifted into his thoughts. While this gal had such a different experience in getting into teaching, it sounds like she has the same basic motivation. Silently and unobtrusively he prayed, "Lord, my God, help me to know what it is that you want. I want your will above all. Please don't allow my current job situation to cloud my listening to you. I want your will." While he would have liked to have heard God speaking to him, right there in the mall, He didn't.

He looked up and saw Andy and Courtney in happy conversation. They had really hit it off. Blake thought of how they looked like they went together. Both of them were a little chubby, they wore glasses and were a bit geekish. Neither of them were the socially inept brand of geek, but they both had that air of loving their books, computers and movies (at this particular moment they were comparing notes on favorite movies). It would be nice if Andy would find a girl that would make him happy. Although Andy usually wouldn't admit it, Blake knew he was lonely.

CHAPTER 23

*"Instruction from Your lips is better for me than thousands of gold and silver pieces."
Psalm 119:72*

On the drive home after lunch, Blake found himself feeling very emotional. While he was happy for Andy, he had been thrilled to see Andy and Courtney strolling off into the mall together as the lunch group was breaking up, but it stirred up longings for Elaine. This whole idea that maybe God gave him direction and maybe he didn't, was really unbalancing. Then there was a song on the radio, it wasn't really a terribly sad song, but it was just too much on top of everything else. He found tears running down

his face, but they weren't just tears of sadness. He pulled the car off onto a side street and turned it off. Then, the crying began in earnest.

In the midst of his tears, he knew he had to pray as much as he needed to breathe. His prayer was disjointed, but from his heart. It was full of praise and thanksgiving, but also was a pouring out of his fears, sadness and disappointments. When it was all over, he laughed as he realized he must have been quite a sight. He didn't know how long he had been badly parked in front of somebody's house crying his eyes out and having a crazy conversation, even though he was the only person in the car. He didn't really care who might have seen him, because right here in his car on a suburban street, Blake had talked to the Almighty God, the King of the Universe, the Creator of All Things and the Source of All Wisdom! Furthermore, he now knew, without a doubt, that in God's will and through His unlimited power, that Blake was going to become a teacher! As Blake started his car and pulled off, he laughed aloud out of sheer joy!

Up to this point he hadn't told a soul about the possibility of God leading him to teach. He had just been afraid that it was nothing but his imagination. Now he pulled out his phone and called the person he most wanted to share the news with.

When Nikki answered, Blake said, "Nikki, God is so awesome, you aren't going to believe what He is doing in my life!"

"Don't keep me waiting, tell me."

Blake teased, "How about I tell you in person, over dinner tonight?"

"Blake, while I would love to, you know we've talked about that."

"Yeah, I know, but you can't blame a guy for trying to spend time with a good-looking girl like you. Everything seems so right with the world at this moment, I thought perhaps if I asked again, I might get a different answer."

Nikki laughed, "Just what kind of drugs are you doing? You seem on top of the world."

Blake laughed, "Being in the presence of God can have that effect. I just spent some glorious time crying my eyes out and conversing with the Lord on some side street. I'm sure if the people inside the house I was parked in front of, looked out, they would have been sure they had a crazy person on their hands. I was just driving down Hawkings Lane when God called me to pray RIGHT NOW. I barely got the car parked before He came over me. It was an absolutely amazing experience. Then, not only did I spend time with the Almighty, but I have a calling. He wants to use me! He wants me to go into teaching!"

Blake could hear the happiness in her voice as Nikki said, "Oh Blake, I am so happy for you. I do wish you were close enough to give you a big hug of congratulations. Teaching, huh? I never heard you say anything about an interest in teaching."

"When I was young, I wanted to be a teacher just like a middle school math teacher that had changed my life. Over the years, that dream got lost. Perhaps that was God speaking to me, even back then."

Nikki said, "That is so cool!"

"I don't have a clue how this is supposed to work. I don't know what I need to do to get a teaching degree. I don't know if this is night classes or I go back to school full time. I don't know what school to go to. I don't even know how many classes I would have to take...I doubt my business classes will transfer, but I should have all the core

classes out of the way. Gee, I really don't know anything about what I'm in for." said Blake.

"Don't you worry a bit about the details. If this is his plan, then He is all about the details, all you have to do is be faithful and obedient. He will take care of everything else. Just trust Him."

"Nikki, you are a gem! I am so glad the Lord brought you into my life!"

EPILOGUE

"We know that all things work together for the good of those who love God..."

Romans 8:28

Blake placed a bouquet of yellow daisies on the grave and said, "Happy Anniversary, Elaine. You know I will always love you and I will always miss you. You made me a better person when we were together. You showed me what real faith looked like. I am so sorry that I was too stubborn to let real faith work in my life until you were gone. I now know that I missed out on a whole level of intimacy with you by not really submitting to Christ, and I regret that. You were such an awesome influence on me, you will always live on forever in me.

"As Nikki and I have been making our wedding preparations, I can't help but look back and be amazed at how much has changed since you died. I was so depressed about losing you, but that was the exact slingshot I needed to get intimate with Jesus. My job got so awful after Jim got replaced by Oliver. Trying to deal with him through the day, while going to school at night was about enough to make me insane, but you know what? Through it all, Jesus was there for me. He provided me with supportive friends and the peace that only He can give.

"I still can't really believe that Nikki and I are going to get married. While we had developed a really good friendship, it wasn't an easy transition into a romantic relationship. That was my fault. Somehow, I was always looking for you in her. I had to reach the point of realizing that she was herself, not some incarnation of you. That was hard, because it felt like I had to give up another part of you. But I believe that Nikki and I will have a good life together, because Christ is right there in the middle of our relationship.

"This week my students found out I was getting married next month. They were so excited and happy for me. The way they responded was a great confirmation that I was really developing a real relationship with them. I really am happy in teaching, it is so much more satisfying, at a deeper level, than my old job could have ever been. I really feel like I'm making a difference in their lives. They know about my faith and it still amazes me at how often they came to me with prayer requests or questions about faith. There are so many kids out there that are hungry for something real. I pray that the Lord allows me to provide Him to those students in even greater ways.

"It was terrible when you died, but God is so good. He has really come in and given me new joy: joy in Him, joy in my students and teaching and joy in Nikki. This could never have happened without you. Your life was so short, but it was so worthwhile. I will always love you."

Blake stood up and returned to the car where Nikki was waiting for him. Deep in his soul, Blake thanked God for everything he had been given, he was sure it was more

than any person really deserved. In spite of the amazing generosity and depth of God's blessings he had already experienced, Blake suspected that this was only the beginning of what he would see.

God of my praise, do not be silent.
Psalm 109:1

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About the author:

The real author of this novel is the Almighty God, however He chose to use the imperfect instrument of Richard McInteer to translate His perfect thoughts into a written story. Richard loves the Lord and loves His Holy Word. He has no formal training in theology, no professional position in a church, but is qualified through Luke 10:21

At that same time Jesus felt the joy that comes from the Holy Spirit, and he said: My Father, Lord of Heaven and earth, I am grateful that you hid all this from wise and educated people and showed it to ordinary people. Yes, Father, that was what pleased you. (Luke 10:21, CEV)

It is the fervent prayer of Richard McInteer that this work of Christ's might help somebody develop the faith to walk through life hand-in-hand with Jesus. Richard lives in Lexington, Kentucky with his wife and 2 daughters.

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Footnotes

[1](#) *Matthew 7:13-14*

[2](#) *Hebrews 12:6*

[3](#) *Matthew 7:21-23*

[4](#) *James 2:19*

[5](#) *Luke 4:34*

[6](#) *Matthew 18:3*

[7](#) *Galatians 6:22*

[8](#) *Hebrews 12:2*

[9](#) *see James 2:10*

[10](#) *Ephesians 2:8-9*

[11](#) *Matthew 23:27-28*

[12](#) *Matthew 7:21-23*

[13](#) *Matthew 7:21-23, NASB*

[14](#) *Philippians 2:12-13*

[15](#) *Philippians 2:5*

[16](#) *Philippians 2:13*

[17](#) *Luke 22:27*

[18](#) *Matthew 12:18*

[19](#) *Matthew 26:39*

[20](#) *Psalms 139:13-14*

[21](#) *Romans 8:14*

[22](#) *see Esther 4:14*

[23](#) *Revelation 3:15-16 "I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I am going to vomit you out of my mouth."*

[24](#) *Genesis 37-47*

[25](#) *Psalms 111*

[26](#) *Psalms 46:10 (NIV)*

[27](#) *Matthew 6:33*

[28](#) *Job 33:14*

[29](#) *Romans 8:38-39*

[30](#) *Micah 6:8*

[31](#) *Colossians 1:9-10*

[32](#) *1 Kings 19:12, KJV*

[33](#) *Deuteronomy 13:4*

[34](#) *Isaiah 51:4*

[35](#) *Micah 6:8*

[36](#) *John 10:3-5*

[37](#) *1 Peter 5:8*

[38](#) *John 8:44*

[39](#) *Psalms 95:7-8*

[40](#) *James 1:14-15*

[41](#) *2 Corinthians 10:4-5*

[42](#) *1 Corinthians 6:19*

[43](#) *Matthew 5:27-28*

[44](#) *Hebrews 11:1*

[45](#) *John 14:13*

[46](#) *John 15:7*

[47](#) *2 Timothy 2:21*

[48](#) *2 Timothy 2:21*

[49](#) *Revelation 22:5*

[50](#) *2 Timothy 2:21*

[51](#) *Judges 6-8*

[52](#) *Matthew 6:10*