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# Introduction



*Two summers ago I experienced a serendipitous collision of circumstances* while on a boating trip off the Wisconsin coast of Lake Michigan. I was alone, my heart was in a posture of worship, and I had some time on my hands. I'd pulled into a tiny harbor, tied up the boat, and was tidying up the place before relaxing for the evening. After studying my boating charts to determine where I would sail the next day, I realized I was only ten miles from the campground where I'd invited Christ to come into my life as a teenager.

I had visited that same harbor on several occasions throughout the years, but for some divine reason on that particular day, I was prompted to go stand on the hillside where I'd first met Christ. The more I thought about it, the more the idea gained steam; so I decided to hunt down transportation to get there. After finding a phone booth, I placed a call to the only cab company in town. Surely they would make the twenty-mile round-trip for me.

The dispatcher on the other end of the phone wasn't about to budge. "Sir, it's too long of a drive out there," she regretted to tell me. "We just don't do that." I haggled with her and even threw more money into the equation, but as the minutes ticked by it became obvious to me that I wasn't getting any closer to my meaningful walk down memory lane.

"Do you know *anyone* who would be willing to make the trip?" I pleaded.

Then, with newfound optimism, she told me she did. She knew a guy who was down on his luck and would probably do *anything* for money. (Should have been my first clue.) If I were willing to take a chance with him, she'd pass along his number.

I've never been opposed to reasonable risk, so twenty-five minutes later, a thoroughly trashed Ford Explorer pulled into the marina parking lot. Its owner looked equally ragged—not surprising, given my phone call had jolted him from a dead sleep at four o'clock in the afternoon. If I were a betting man, I'd have put money on him having more tattoo-covered flesh than not, but nothing was going to eclipse the allure of the mission for me.

I climbed in, and as we headed out, I noticed that all the things that were supposed to stay still on a car in motion were moving, rattling, shaking, and threatening to fall off at any moment. Ironically, the things that were supposed to move wouldn't—such as the passenger window. But the guy was nice enough, and frankly I was just glad to finally be en route.

The fuel gauge was on empty, and when I suggested we stop to let me buy him some gas, the man was incredulous. "Really?" he asked. "No . . . I couldn't do that."

"Come on, I insist," I told him. "You're really helping me out here, and I'd like to return the favor." We eased into the station, and he hopped out to start the pump.

"Two bucks. That's what I'm putting in," he said, as if asking my permission.

"Oh, go ahead and go crazy," I hollered toward him. "Make it ten!" When he joked that in the six months he had owned the vehicle, it had never had a full tank, we agreed to fill the thing up.

Back on the road, he had this huge grin on his face. "Handles different with a full tank!"

"Just keep her on the road, my friend," I laughed.

A few minutes later, we arrived at the camp entrance, and he asked what he was supposed to do while I handled my business. I could tell he was a little unsure about why I had hired a stranger to drive me all the way out to a deserted campground.

"I need to run up ahead for a few minutes to take care of something," I explained. "Why don't you wait here in the car—I'll only be fifteen minutes or so, and then we'll head back." That must have seemed reasonable enough, because he gave me a quick nod as I opened the door to get out.

As soon as my feet hit the ground, I jogged away from the truck, quickly covering the three hundred yards or so to reach the exact place where I'd

encountered grace for the first time. And as I slowed down to approach that little patch of real estate on the side of that hill, the sun beating down on my face, it all came rushing back to me. This was the spot!



*By age seventeen I had already packed a lot of living into life. Even then I knew enough to recognize that the accumulation of more toys, the desperate search for approval, and the ceaseless striving for success just weren't cutting it. My spiritual experience that night at camp wasn't prompted by someone delivering a stirring message or by someone asking me three deep questions. I met Christ because while walking from a mess-hall gathering back to my cabin one night, I was suddenly penetrated by a single verse of Scripture that I had memorized as a kid: "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to God's mercy he saved us."*

*He saved us. He . . . saved . . . us.*

Just after nine o'clock that night, the words I'd read so many times before hit me in a fresh way. Could it really be true that God cared enough about me that he would make provision to save me? Even *me*?

For the first time in my young life, I faced my biggest doubt head-on: *There is no way I could matter so much to God that he would make salvation available to me as a gift—free of charge.* To that point, everything about my existence could be summed up in two words: "Earn it." My father had built into me a monstrous work ethic and had reinforced my Earn-It mantra daily. "You *earn* every penny you make," he would tell me. "You *earn* your way into the starting lineup on the basketball team. You *earn* good grades. You *earn* it all. There is no free lunch!"

*I have been trying my entire life to impress God, I remember thinking. I've poured all my effort into proudly presenting my good deeds to him—my righteousness, my hard work, my striving.* But I felt skeptical all the while—would it ever be enough? Truthfully, I wondered if I would ever reach God's quota and be found acceptable by him.

On that night in eastern Wisconsin, the Holy Spirit imparted to me whatever presence of mind I needed to understand Titus 3:5, and I met Jesus Christ in an authentic way. I remember throwing open the doors of my heart to him in what at the time felt like some sort of amazing grace

attack. I don't know about your faith journey, but I felt the impact of my salvation experience *physically*.

I had run immediately to my cabin to find my buddies, elated by my discovery and armed with a series of "Guys, did you know . . . ?" questions about the grace I'd just stumbled upon. Since lightbulbs had gone on for me, I felt certain that my friends were still in the dark.

"Yeah, yeah, Bill, we know all that," they assured me. "Just go to bed!"

In the dark, silent stillness of the cramped cabin, I thought to myself, *I just never got it until now*. And from that night to this day, I've never really gotten over the power of grace.



*With my not-so-professional driver waiting for me in his truck, I stood in that place a few more minutes and thanked the God of the universe for seeking me out. I thanked him for imprinting that extraordinary verse on my mind at that precise moment in my journey and for radically altering the hinges of history in my life. I thanked him for redirecting me from the business world to the church-work world and for blessing me with a Christian wife and two fantastic kids—now adults who love to serve God and his church.*

As if all that weren't enough, he had also surrounded me with great friends, challenging issues to address, and a compelling vision to pursue. What grace!

My gratitude list seemed to go on forever as my mind flooded with God-given gifts I'd received since that night at camp. I looked down at my feet on that hill, brushing the tears away, and thought, *It all started right here. Thank you, Father! Thank you . . .*

Wondering if I'd lost my ride, I pulled myself together and jogged back to the parking lot. I've never been so relieved to see such a rundown vehicle. After I climbed into the aging Explorer, my driver fired up the engine, and we started the drive back to the marina.

Not two minutes into the trip, he looked over at me. "What was *that* all about?"

I glanced over at him as he stared at the road ahead. "Me standing on the hill over there?"

“Gotta admit it’s a little weird,” he said. “I thought you were going to meet someone here or something. But you went to all this trouble just to stand alone on the side of a hill. What’s that all about?”

“You really want to know?” I asked. When he nodded, I told him that I wanted to come stand on the exact piece of land where I met God.

“Really.” He disguised his cynicism well. “And how exactly does something like that happen?” he asked.

I went on to explain how I’d had the most powerful experience of my entire life on the side of that hill. I told him how I had grown up hearing about God and learning about church but that I’d been on a self-improvement plan for years, always hoping to set righteousness records to earn my way into God’s good favor. “Everything changed for me on that hill—it’s the place where I learned that all of what I was trying to achieve would never get me into a relationship with God.”

My comments sat in the air for a few seconds as I waited for some response that would tell me to keep talking. Suddenly, he piped up. “Well . . . then how the hell do you?”

Relishing his candor, I told him that the way it happened to me was through a single verse of Scripture. “For me, it was in the book of Titus—Titus 3:5 to be exact, which says that Christ ‘saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy.’”

More silence. Then with a hint of awkwardness, “Well that’s a mind-blower, isn’t it?” It was more statement than question.

He then asked what I had done after that verse hit me so hard, and I explained to him the process I went through of opening my will and my heart to Christ, of asking him to forgive my sin, of imploring him to lead my life through his great gift of grace instead of through my own striving.

As I finished my story, I couldn’t help but wonder where he stood with regard to spiritual matters. The silence that ensued was broken by his heartfelt words. “Look at me, though. I’m a loser. I’m just a loser. I mean, can something like that happen to someone like me?”

*What a holy moment*, I thought as I collected my thoughts. “First of all, you’re not a loser,” I assured him. “You’re anything but a loser. You’re so important to God that he’s been pursuing you since the day you were born. And you can have the same relationship with God that I found in

my late teen years. It can happen to you anytime, anywhere. If you accept his gift of grace, you will be made new, and he will guide your life for the rest of your days.”

When we arrived back at the marina, I handed him a handsome sum of money and thanked him for his willingness to help me out. As he prepared to leave, he said, “I never would’ve guessed that today would turn out like it did. Thanks for saying what you said to me. You know, there’s a pastor starting a new church right beside where I live. He keeps coming by my apartment, saying this church presents the gospel message in a new way and that I might actually like it. The pastor’s a pretty good guy, I guess, but I’ve been too stubborn to go. This weekend, maybe I’ll check it out.”



*As I climbed aboard the boat in the early evening hours, I sat down and reflected on those ninety minutes. My mind was preoccupied with so many questions. What was that all about, God? Why was I prompted to go visit the camp today of all days, after being in this harbor so many times before? Why did I persist when the cab company said no? Why did I agree to call a complete stranger to see if he would haul me across town? And why on earth did I get into a truck like that?*

*My questions culminated with this idea: Won't it be something if I make that young man's acquaintance on the other side!*

Whether the experience was about my own need to reflect on a powerful conversion experience or whether it was all about taking a walk across a marina parking lot and offering hope to someone down on his luck, I don't know. But one thing I've learned is that life's great moments evolve from simple acts of cooperation with God's mysterious promptings — nudges that always lean toward finding what's been lost and freeing what's been enslaved.

The adventure of collaborating with God involves bestowing the greatest gift a person can receive — the gift of amazing grace — on undeserving (and often unsuspecting) people like you and me.



# The Ultimate Walk Across a Room



*Ten thousand steps.*

Roughly, that's the distance you travel sunrise to sunset, each and every day of your life. It adds up to about 115,000 miles in a lifetime—or more than four times around this big blue planet of ours.<sup>1</sup>

With that said, just one question: Are you using your steps wisely?

Assume the average distance across most rooms is twenty feet—about ten steps. The question I hope to answer is this: What if ten steps—just one one-thousandth of your daily average—could actually impact eternity?

If so, it might well change the way you walk.

The concept surfaced many months ago after I attended a lunch in a southern state. Hundreds of us representing a variety of ethnicities gathered in a hotel ballroom, and I sensed I was in for an interesting experience. As the rest of my table convened, I would discover that our diversity went beyond race to span age, background, profession, and religion.

The moderator delivered some opening remarks and asked everyone to spend a few minutes before lunch making introductions, revealing where we lived, what we did for work, and why we'd come to the event. As we went through the exercise, I spotted a large African-American gentleman seated across the table from me. During his turn, he introduced himself with a name that was clearly Muslim. Then, halfway through the program, he caught my eye across the table and, in the midst of bustling conversations and clinking silverware, mouthed the words, "I love your books!"

Reflexively, I swiveled my head around to see if perhaps a bona fide author had approached our table from behind. Finding no one there, I turned back, dumbfounded, pointed my finger toward my chest, and mouthed, "Me?"

Grinning, he said, “Yes! Let’s talk after lunch.”

*Yeah*—a dose of intrigue ran through my mind—*let’s do that*.

The lunch progressed while I racked my brain, searching for a rational explanation for how this Muslim man had stumbled upon my distinctly Christian books.

Afterward, he waved me over and began fitting the puzzle pieces together. “I now understand that my comment was probably a little confusing because you assume I’m a Muslim,” he said.

“I try *never* to assume anything in situations like these,” I laughed, “but yeah, I’m a little curious.”

As he related his story, my heart and mind awakened afresh to the power of personal evangelism. The insight God would give me after interacting with this man would shed new light for me on how the Holy Spirit moves in the lives of Christ-followers when they commit to staying in vibrant, dynamic fellowship with God. After the encounter, I spent weeks thinking about his comments and growing increasingly awestruck by my discoveries about what *must* occur in the lives of Christ-followers for them to lead lives of impact.



*My tablemate had been a Muslim most of his life. He pointed out that being an African-American Muslim in a southern city, coupled with his current line of work, made for an often-uncomfortable existence.*

“It hasn’t been an easy go,” he said. “As you might imagine, I’ve had a lot of struggles in social settings. And in my profession we have a lot of cocktail parties and other evening events. The natural pattern for me is to show up fashionably late, graciously accept a drink and something to eat, and throw my efforts into trying to make some business connections. Inevitably, I wind up standing alone, stuck against a wall or isolated in a corner. As soon as I think I’ve lasted as long as social etiquette requires, I discretely plot my exit and then leave. It’s just something I’ve learned to live with.

“One night, I was at this type of party. As usual, I noticed several small circles of people forming to chat about this or that. I wasn’t included, but again, I’ve become accustomed to the scenario.

“At one point, I saw a man on the other side of the room engrossed in discussion with a few people of his own kind, if you will. Suddenly he

looked away from that particular group and noticed me standing alone by the far wall. This is exactly how it happened, Bill. He extricated himself from his conversational clique, walked clear across the room, stuck out his hand to me, and introduced himself.

“You know, it was so easy and so natural,” the Muslim man continued. “In the moments that followed, we talked about our mutual profession, about our families and business and sports. Eventually our conversation found its way to issues of faith. I took a risk in telling him that I was Muslim—I was a little hesitant about how he’d respond. He told me he was a Christ-follower but that, truth be told, he knew almost nothing about Islam. You can imagine my surprise when he asked if I would do him the *courtesy* of explaining the basics of Islam over a cup of coffee sometime. Can you believe that? He said he was a curious type and genuinely wanted to understand my faith system and why I’d devoted my life to it.

“The next time we met, whatever doubts I had about him truly wanting to hear my beliefs were quickly dispelled. He *really* sought to understand my life and faith. We began meeting almost weekly, and each time I sat across from him, I was stunned by what an engaged and compassionate listener he was.

“One week, I even took the opportunity to ask him about his beliefs. I’d been a Christian as a kid but had left God, left the faith, left it all because the church my family attended was so racially prejudiced. I wanted no part of *that* Christianity. When the tables turned and I was on the receiving end of *his* faith story, he patiently described why he’d given his whole life to this person named Jesus Christ. I couldn’t believe how easily the conversations evolved—and how respectfully and sensitively he conveyed his love of God. Despite our deep-seated religious differences, we were becoming fast friends.

“It went on this way for some time as we’d meet to hash through nuances of our faith experiences. Sometimes he would ask for a couple of days to find answers to my questions; other times, he knew exactly where I was struggling and seemed to have the perfect words to untangle my confusion. There finally came a day—I remember being home alone when this happened—that I felt totally compelled to pray to God. I kneeled beside my bed, told God everything I was feeling, and in the end gave my

life to Jesus Christ. And in the space of about a week, that single decision changed *everything* in my world! Every single thing.”



*My heart was so full as his testimony washed over me. What a gripping story!* I discovered that he'd recently become part of the leadership in his local church, which is where he had come across some of my books. And his steps of faith had already impacted his family, several of whom had begun making strides toward Christ. He really had begun a completely new life—one immersed in the companionship, power, and saving grace of Jesus Christ.

As I stood in the emptying ballroom of a sterile hotel on a muggy afternoon in the Deep South, I held my own private worship service, thanking God for redeeming this man, thanking God for changing his forever and for changing, very likely, the forevers of his immediate family.

All because of one man's walk across the room.

## ENTERING THE ZONE OF THE UNKNOWN

Friends, I must hear a dozen salvation stories a week while traveling and ministering on behalf of Willow Creek. They come in various forms from all sorts of men, women, and children, and I celebrate each and every one of them! But on that day, as I sat on the airplane flying me to the next city, an interesting thought raced through my mind, warranting special reflection: *What if redirecting a person's forever really is as simple as walking across a room?*

There was something about that story that God wanted to sear into me, and it dealt with far more than the end result of a man coming to faith in Christ. It was as if God himself said, “If you'll invest some energy thinking about this story, I'll give you an image that will fire you up for a long, long time.”

And as I mulled it over, what came into focus was a clear picture of what things must have been like for the Christ-follower during that cocktail party. He'd found himself in a social setting, engaged in what I have always deemed to be a “circle of conversational comfort.” He was involved with a group in which it was easy for him to relate and effortless for him to

engage. There was zero threat of anything risky or unsafe unfolding, which is why he had every reason to stay within the boundaries of that little Circle of Comfort, a place we've all enjoyed on one occasion or another.

Yet drawn by the fact that one man stood unintentionally and uncomfortably alone, he left that circle and walked stride by stride across the room. It was as though in a flash of insight, he heard a word of encouragement directly from the Holy Spirit: "Why don't you go over and extend a hand of friendship to that guy? Go see if he may need a little conversation or encouragement—who knows what might happen?"

As I chewed on the thought, I realized that not only did he see something and hear something as the Spirit guided him; he also *felt* something worthy of acting upon. The Spirit living inside him caused him to feel such compassion for the man standing alone that he excused himself from his Circle of Comfort, made the turn to the other side of the room, and started walking in the direction of a place I call the "Zone of the Unknown."

It's foreign territory, this zone. He had no clue what would happen when he stuck out his hand to the tall Muslim man. He knew nothing about where the conversation would go or if there would be any conversation at all. He was uncertain what this individual's reaction to him would be. But he was already committed. He had left his Circle of Comfort, he had walked by faith all the way across the room, and he had resolved in his heart, probably praying every step of the way, to enter into the Zone of the Unknown and see what God might do. (In my opinion, it's within this zone that God does his very *best* work.)

I couldn't think of another life-change story that had had as much impact on me. *But why?* I kept pestering God. *What is it about this one?*

The power of it, I concluded, was that it gave me a framework for something I'd been thinking about since my own salvation experience more than thirty years earlier: personal evangelism really *can* be as simple as a walk across a room—just a few ordinary Spirit-guided steps can have truly extraordinary outcomes.

## CHRIST'S WALK ACROSS THE ROOM

There was an intriguing subplot to what God was revealing. It's as if he were saying to me, "Now you grasp with a fresh grip what my Son did."

Track with me along metaphorical lines, and I think you'll agree that the original (and consummate) work of personal evangelism began with a walk across a "room"—a very large room, in fact. At a certain point in history, Jesus Christ himself left the marvelous fellowship of the Trinity and the worship and adoration of the angels; he wrapped himself in human flesh, and he walked across the cosmos in order to stretch out a hand to people like you and me—many of whom were right in the middle of wrecking their lives.

Romans 5:8 summarizes Christ's redemptive strides: it was when we were helplessly in the throes of sin that Christ extracted himself from the *ultimate* Circle of Comfort—heaven itself—to step across time and space to rescue us. Jesus took a decided step toward the ungodly, embracing the worst this planet had to offer with acceptance and love and forgiveness. Miraculously, Christ's death for rebellious and sin-scarred people declared amnesty for *everyone*.

Think about it: giving your life for a noble person is one thing, but laying it all down for vagrants like us? It was an undeserved and unexpected move, to say the least. And the correlation is revolutionary to Christ-followers: we take walks across rooms because *he* took the ultimate walk across a room.

If you've ever wondered why God would go to such lengths to prove his love, you're in good company. To clear up any confusion his first-century audience might have had about why he came, Christ said, "I came to seek and to save what was lost."

That's it. *People* were Jesus' One Thing. And they still are. People who are sick. People who are lonely. People who are wandering, depressed, and hopeless. People who have gotten themselves tangled up in suffocating habits and destructive relationships.

I think of the story from John 8 when Christ appears in the temple courts, all set to teach the crowd that has gathered there. A group of Pharisees arrive on the scene, dragging with them a woman with a checkered moral past who's just been caught in the act of adultery. Imagine the horror of being thrust into such a public place, your worst sins on display for the masses to see. Adultery is a serious offense, the Pharisees argue, and in keeping with God's Law from the days of Moses, Jesus will surely agree to have this woman stoned to death because of her ghastly sin.

The Pharisees know that Jesus is in a bind, and you sense from the text that they enjoy, with a sort of morbid delight, forcing the self-proclaimed Messiah into the middle of a moral dilemma: If he lets the woman off the hook, he'll be denying the validity of the law. But if he allows her to be stoned, he might be accused of being unmerciful—or even of being an enemy of the Roman government, which was the only group allowed to carry out capital punishment.

Jesus' reaction is fascinating. "I assume you're going to stone her," he begins. "So if that's true, then let's at least bring some order to the process. Go ahead and stone her, but let's just form a line, and those of you with *no* sin, you get to be at the front of the line. You throw your rocks first."

Obviously, Christ's plan wrecks the Pharisees' whole day. And understandably, the law-loving Pharisees have no reply. One by one, their rocks thump to the sand and they walk away.

Jesus finds himself alone with this woman who has tasted forgiveness and mercy for the first time. Although he has every right to get in her face and criticize her poor life choices, the Bible says he chooses a different course. His travel-weary knees softly creak as he crouches down beside her, his eyes wet with tears. "I don't condemn you—really. That's not why I came. I came to redeem your failures, not to punish you for your mistakes. Now go—don't sin anymore. Start living a brand-new life today! Don't fall back into your same sinful habits. I will help you live a new life starting right here, right now."

Friends, is there a better picture of God's heart than this—the heart that invites someone to freedom instead of indictment? Without excusing the woman's sinful indiscretions, Jesus said, "Everyone has taken some wrong turns. Everyone is in need of forgiveness and redemption and healing. Everyone needs to know the love that only my Father can provide. *That* is why I've come." And with customary tenacity, he left the temple courts that day, unwavering in his belief that his restorative vision would one day be reality.

Still today, as you love people, serve people, point people toward faith in Christ, redirect wayward people, restore broken people, and develop people into the peak of their spiritual potential, you reaffirm your understanding of your primary mission in the world.

## TUNING IN TO HEAVEN

Several years ago, I was copiloting a private aircraft that was headed back to Chicago from the West Coast. Piloting the plane was a gentleman I'd flown with several times before. On each occasion, once we reached cruising altitude and switched on the autopilot, we'd enjoy open conversations about any number of issues.

On that particular night, our dialogue was generally about the task at hand. We discussed flight patterns and weather conditions and altitude assessments, mostly prompted by air traffic controllers on the ground who were feeding updates to us. But with about ninety minutes left in the flight, I silently pleaded for God's intervention. *Help me direct things to more substantive issues.*

After the next intercom update, I ventured into the Zone of the Unknown and asked my pilot friend if he would ever make a flight like this without listening to air traffic control. Would he ever consider—even for a moment—silencing the radio and directing the flight alone?

He didn't waste any time answering. "Of course not!" he laughed. "It'd be crazy—I need all the information and assistance I can get my hands on . . . especially in dicey weather."

I prayed for a boost of confidence and then said, "If you can believe it, some people fly through their entire life with the radio to heaven turned off. They receive zero input from God. They get no guidance, no wisdom, and no counsel. A lot of times, they fly blindly into bad weather and end up crashing and burning. You'd be surprised how many people do that."

Silence crept through the cockpit as I waited and prayed.

A few seconds later, his voice now sobered, he said, "I guess that would be pretty stupid, wouldn't it?"

I conceded that there were probably better approaches to life and then sat there awestruck as a full hour of redemptive dialogue unfolded en route to Chicago. "Well, how do you turn the 'radio' on?" he had asked. And so, in the most straightforward language I could find, I told him.



*Several days later, I reflected on the boldness I'd exhibited during that flight. I haven't always been so daring, but as I gave it some thought, I landed on an explanation for why it seemed to be showing up more often: I really*



believe the saving message of Jesus Christ. I don't only preach it; I believe it! I honestly believe that every wayward person I know would live a vastly better life if God's love, grace, and redemption were operating in their lives.

Do you believe this too? A man once told me that he never shares his faith with anyone. I thought it was an interesting comment and probed a little as to why he was so resolved about his role (or lack thereof) in evangelism.

His answer shocked me. "I would never want to inflict the burden of God on anyone," he said.

*Wow. That is not at all the God I know*, I thought. The God I know invaded my world with love, acceptance, and grace and stuck me on the back of a launched rocket at age seventeen that I still haven't peeled myself off of. Nor do I want to anytime soon!

But it's an interesting thought to ponder, isn't it: *Who is the God you know?*

Is the God you know full of grace and mercy and compassion? Is the God you know mysterious, surprising, captivating? Is he forever unchanging and yet always brand new? Does he inspire you with his big ideas about how your life can really count? Is he faithful?

In my experience, the people who find themselves taking walks across rooms have first landed on the belief that the God they know is *worth knowing!* They have cultivated a heart posture that says, "Well, of course everyone I know would want this type of relationship with God! I'm absolutely sure you'd all love what I'm experiencing here. . . ."

If you are in love with the God you know, let me ask you to rewind your faith journey a little to your pre-Christian days. Recall that time in your life when you would get up in the morning and realize once again that you had nobody to share your day with. *Guess I'm doing this one alone too*, you'd think. Or you would drive to work and be the only one in your car. You'd have long stretches of time with no words from heaven and nothing supernatural invading your ho-hum world. You would violate your conscience and have zero awareness that grace could actually cover it, if only you'd ask.

Friends, if you have been wrecked by God's gift of new life—as I thankfully have—and if you want to live your life as an expression of love

for the great God you know, then let's crank up our boldness meters and introduce as many people as possible to the God who wants desperately to enfold them in his grace!

## THE GREATEST GIFT

My belief system hasn't always been so firm, but when I was in my early twenties and a student at Trinity College, my professor Dr. Gilbert Bilezikian delivered lessons that inspired me, convicted me, and compelled me to action. To a group of us who were leading a high school ministry at the time, Dr. B said, "Throughout the course of your life, you're going to give your life to something. You will. *All* people do. They give their lives to pleasure or to possessions, to the attainment of popularity or to the acquisition of more power. But always to something."

As he plowed ahead, I got sidelined by my own questions. What was I giving my life to? What was the one great *something* I was living for? I began to wonder whether I was really as concerned about other people as I said I was or if I was just hiding my self-interest behind a facade of interest. My heart shuddered as I stared at the truth about what captivated most of my thoughts. It wasn't exactly laudable.

During that season of life, I had been anticipating a lucrative career in business. But as Dr. B's words crept deeper into my heart, I was suddenly and powerfully drawn to one prevailing preoccupation—people. People who face a Christless eternity. People who are ostracized and isolated and hopeless. People who are living for achievements that do not fulfill, accolades that never satisfy, and money that doesn't bring genuine happiness.

I wanted to approach life like Jesus had. The mind of Christ hadn't been consumed by business gains or money or fame but instead was endlessly focused on one thing: people—those who were lost and found, young and old, rich and poor, sought-after and rejected. Never has anyone displayed such a prodigious obsession with people as did Jesus. And in his customarily straightforward style, Dr. B reminded me that Jesus' expectation is that his followers *share* this magnificent obsession.

"True followers of Christ who really get it right," he said, "give themselves to *people*. Most importantly, they give themselves to pointing people to faith in Christ. That is the highest and best use of a human life—to

have it serve as a signpost that points people toward God.” Dr. B summed up my entire belief system with a brilliant flash of insight: if you really believe in the redeeming and transforming power of God’s presence in a person’s life, then the single greatest gift you can give someone is an explanation of how to be rightly connected to him.

It’s as though Jesus is saying to his followers, “What I did as I walked across the cosmos all those years ago, I now want *you* to do. Every day, try to point every person you meet to me. Live as though you actually *believe* that your parent, your coworker, and your neighbor would be better off if they knew my Father—if they were on the receiving end of his counsel, his wisdom, and his guidance. Become walk-across-the-room people who follow my lead! Be people who are willing to seize every opportunity I give you—not motivated by guilt or fear or obligation, but just with an eye on me, a pliable heart, and a passion for my people.”

These days, I recognize just how correct Dr. B was. Because when most people I talk to really think through their own faith journeys, they land on the fact that Christ wasn’t the only one who took a walk to rescue them. Almost without exception, Christ-followers tell me that their faith stories involve someone somewhere who took a risk to walk across a room and to reflect the curiosity, kindness, and love of Christ. Someone somewhere made the decision to take the gift they’d been given and bestow it on them—at the time, a wayward soul living very far from God.

When you choose to live by faith instead of by sight, taking these walks, extending yourself, and exhibiting care to people who need to be enfolded in community, there is something a lot like Jesus going on in your mind and spirit. According to the apostle Paul, it was Jesus who, “being in the very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a human being, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!”<sup>2</sup>

Let me say it again: the single greatest gift you can give someone is an introduction to the God who asked his Son to go the unthinkable distance to redeem them. And when you allow your life’s great preoccupation to be people, you’ll find that when Christ asks you to take a walk across a street, into a restaurant, up a flight of stairs, through a locker room, wherever,

you are ready! You're ready to leave your Circle of Comfort and follow his lead because you remember the fact that Jesus once crossed an entire universe to rescue you—the same Jesus who was known to enjoy deep community from time to time but who would consistently and unapologetically excuse himself from a Circle of Comfort and walk in the direction of someone he could direct toward the Father.

Today, to Christ-followers all over the planet, he says, “Reflect my love! And repeat my action.”

### TAKE A WALK!

When my son was in the fifth or sixth grade, he joined a soccer league. And although Todd was a talented athlete for his age, team sports were a little intimidating to him.

The man who served for the next three years as Todd's soccer coach was a businessman named Brian, a fantastic guy who really loved kids. Miraculously, he built hope and confidence into my otherwise-apprehensive son and actually sold Todd on the idea that he could be a terrific soccer player.

For three years I stood on the sidelines at almost every game. My wife, Lynne, my daughter, Shauna, and I cheered for Todd beside other parents who were rooting for their little guys, all of us engaging in the obnoxious hollering that families do at youth soccer matches. Afterward, we'd typically enjoy a few minutes of fellowship with other families that attended Willow.

One afternoon, Brian was in the center of the field after a long day, loading cones into his car so that he could head home. Just then, the Holy Spirit said, “Walk across the soccer field and help him, Hybels. Leave this safe little group, and go see if you can get to know Brian.” I can replay the scene in my mind as if it happened yesterday.

As I put one foot in front of the other and headed toward where Brian stood, I tried to prepare myself for whatever might unfold once I opened my mouth. *Ought to be interesting.*

After introducing myself, we chatted about the kids on the team, about what line of work Brian was involved in, and eventually about my occupation. He wasn't too thrilled to discover that I was a pastor, but as weeks

went by, he continued to engage in brief conversations with me after games or practices.

Each time we talked, I would thank Brian for the meaningful impact he was having on my son. “I appreciate how much time you volunteer out of your busy schedule to coach these kids,” I would tell him. “I think what you are doing is noble and classy, Brian. I’ll always be grateful.”

On one day in particular, when we were nearing a holiday service at Willow, I was prompted by the Spirit to walk across that soccer field again, this time to see if Brian would like to attend the service. Mustering an additional ounce of courage with each step I took, I asked him if he would consider coming to Willow just once with me.

His response instantly erased any hope of receptivity on his part. “Oh, man, Bill, I *knew* it would turn into this! I just *knew* someday it would land here. Look, I know plenty about Willow Creek—I get tied up in its traffic every week. The whole thing frustrates me. God is not part of my life, church is not part of my life, and I’d just as soon take this whole thing off of the agenda here.” (Hey, at least he was clear.)

“Okay, Brian,” I said, trying to relax him. “No pressure, I promise. I’m committed to respecting your wishes.”

And each week the following year, I would walk step by step across that soccer field to help him pick up balls and cones. How small those steps felt! Was I helping at all?

“How’d things go this week?” I’d ask. And we would talk about business and the deals he was working on. Then he would ask me how my week had been. I suppose my no-pressure approach served its purpose: I no longer offended Brian with unsolicited invitations to church. But to me, the whole experience seemed like an exercise in spiritual water-treading.

Eventually Todd cycled out of the soccer league, and I lost contact with Brian altogether. Frankly, I assumed I’d never see him again. But after several years had passed, the day came when Brian’s world was turned dramatically upside down. Business issues shifted. His family life tilted. In sobering and unexpected ways, pain and despair walked through the front door of his life and took up residence there.

He picked up the phone and called me one afternoon to ask if he could come by to talk. “I *don’t* want to come to a service,” he clarified. “I just need to talk about a few things.”

After that initial meeting in my office, Brian and I would meet several times, but I'd sense only minuscule progress during the conversations. At some point, he stopped calling altogether. And although I wondered how he was managing in life and whether or not he'd ironed out his pain, I honored his desire to lead the pace of our relationship.

Months later, I was standing at the front of the auditorium preparing a group of new believers for their upcoming baptism experience. As I explained the meaning, purpose, and significance of water baptism, I looked to my left and saw Brian sitting there, right in the front row. *He has no idea where he is!* I thought. *He's in a baptism meeting, for crying out loud. How did he stumble into this one?* I regained my composure long enough to finish my comments, being extraordinarily careful to complete my instructions in a way that wouldn't screen out a guy like Brian for the rest of his life. There was no way he was ready for the *baptism deal!*

After the meeting, I approached Brian and asked him to walk with me to the parking lot. "I've got to get going," I explained, "but let's at least talk on the way out." As soon as we had moved away from the crowds, I stopped and looked Brian right in the eyes. "What in the world were you doing in a baptism meeting?"

His answer floored me.

"A couple of months ago, I snuck in during a service and sat in the back. You were giving a message on abandoning the self-improvement plan and getting on board with the grace plan instead. You talked about the need to open ourselves to God by accepting the work of his Son, Jesus Christ. And on that day, Bill, I gave my heart to Christ. So what I'm saying is, I was here tonight—believe it or not—because I want to be *baptized.*"

His face was beaming as mine fell slack-jawed. I couldn't hide my astonishment. "You have *got* to be kidding me. Really. You have got to be kidding me!" I stood there staring at him with a dumbfounded look on my face for probably two full minutes.

Sometime after that conversation, I had the privilege of baptizing Brian at Willow Creek, the place where he still continues to serve, the place where he fell in love with a godly woman and was married, and the place where he and his wife now teach other couples how to experience the joy and elation of a Christ-centered marriage.



*A few weeks before Christmas a couple of years ago, I was headed to my office with Todd, who was all grown up by then. We turned the corner in a stairwell, careening right into a large, muscular man. Instinctively, I took a step back as I looked up. It was Brian! And in a split second, a fifteen-year void between my son and his favorite childhood coach was filled. With the type of love that only Christ-followers can manifest, he threw his arms around Todd's neck. "How great it is to see you!" Brian raved.*

After a few moments of conversation, Brian headed down the steps. When he reached the first landing, he stopped and looked up at us. "Hey, Bill," he said, "I just want to thank you for all those times you walked across the soccer field and opened yourself up. Really . . . thanks." And with that, he turned to go.

Friends, that's as good as it gets in my world. And my guess is that similar experiences would qualify for your life's as-good-as-it-gets moments too. Knowing that the God of the universe has equipped you to bestow the greatest gift in this life on another human being, choose today to lead a life of impact—eternal impact.

Take a walk! See what he might do.