

COLLEGE FAITH 2



THE LEAVING

Ann Graber Hershberger
 Professor of Nursing
 Eastern Mennonite University
 Harrisonburg, Virginia

HAVING BEEN A “GOOD” CHRISTIAN all my life, I was jarred when, in my sophomore year of college, I began to doubt parts and then the whole foundation of my previously strong faith. I was doing all the right things to nurture my faith. I was enrolled in a denominational Christian college pursuing a major that was easily linked with Christian service. I participated in Bible studies on my dorm floor, attended a small local church, and was active in outreach ministries on campus.

Still the questions came. Is my faith real? Is God real? How can I know? The questions built up emotions of anguish and even anger. I could not confide in my friends, for they would react in horror, fearing for my salvation, and assure me of their prayers—prayers I did not want. I could not talk to my parents for the same reasons. I was too embarrassed to disclose my thoughts to my teachers. I felt alone.

As my angst increased, I found I could not study, for the question of God overwhelmed everything. Life had no meaning. I often took walks around our small campus and particularly sought the wilder, uncultivated spaces. A particularly inviting space was a path through a field of tall grasses at the far edge of campus. Near the middle of the field stood a large oak tree that I had found to be a perfect place to study on Saturday afternoons. One evening, unable to concentrate on anatomy and physiology, I fled my pile of books in the library and walked that trail in the moonless night. When I reached the oak tree, I threw myself down on the ground.

“God, are you real?” I cried. “If you are real, let me alone.” Perhaps I was asking God to reveal Himself to me, but the words were different—“let me alone.”

There was no answer within or without. Then for one awful instant I was alone, utterly alone. The ground seemed to fall away from under me, and I felt a deep, dark, terrible nothingness.

It was enough. God had answered my prayer and had left me. There was no vision, no deep thoughts, no explanation, but I knew in the deepest parts of my being that God had truly been with me all those years. I also knew with certainty that I could not live without God. There would come myriads of questions about who God is, how God works, and how I relate to God. Thus, through joys and sorrows, through war and personal loss, through work in a profession that deals with pain and death, I rest on the inexpressible bedrock of God’s presence. For “underneath are the everlasting arms” (Deuteronomy 33:27).

T H E S E C O N D M E E T I N G

If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. Psalm 139:8-10 NIV

.....



A LONELY PRANKSTER AND A FERVENT PRAYER

F. Gregory Campbell
President
Carthage College
Kenosha, Wisconsin

THE AUTUMN OF 1956 was a tough time for the farmers of Central Texas. The growing season had produced yet another crop failure. The drought of several years still refused to abate. Not since the

“dust bowl” of the 1930s had the land been so barren or the people so poor.

My dorm counselor at Baylor University was a ministerial student in his senior year. He served as pastor of an isolated and tiny Baptist church in the countryside outside Waco. The farmers could pay him practically nothing, but they did provide him an opportunity for his first pastorate. We students called him “Charley”; they called him “Reverend White.”

In the dorm (actually a “temporary” army surplus barracks already twenty years old), Charley tried to keep order among fifty freshman men. He was a perfect foil. He never quite could catch up with the shaving cream fights or the water battles. I was immediately acclaimed “president” of the Garbage Can Rollers Club (a sport testing who could roll a can furthest down the hallway). The honorific title was ironic. I never had rolled a garbage can in my life. At age sixteen, 1,500 miles from home in a new and strange place, I was bitterly homesick. Charley could see I needed extra attention.

One day, he invited me to ride out with him to his country church for a Wednesday-evening prayer meeting. I realized he was trying to distract me from my loneliness. I said, “Sure, I’ll go.” Little did I expect an encounter that would remain etched in my memory almost half a century later.

In that small white-frame building, there were gathered perhaps twenty people whose weather-beaten faces betrayed the toil of their lives. Charley read a Scripture passage and gave a brief devotional. They sang a few hymns. I no longer know for sure, but my memory says they sang “Showers of Blessing,” with its line: “Mercy drops round us are falling, but for the showers we plead.”

Then came the prayer circle. For what seemed like an eternity—the emotion was so intense—individuals took turns praying aloud as their relatives and neighbors listened. Their vocabulary was basic, their grammar

C O L L E G E F A I T H 2

poor; the people were semi-literate, at best. Again and again, they prayed for rain, and lots of it.

There was one who carried a tragically heavy burden. Claspng her gnarled hands, with grime ground into the skin and dirt under the fingernails, she pleaded that God would send a miracle and save her son. He was a young man battling a deadly disease, no longer able to come to prayer meeting himself. For minutes on end, her voice rose and fell. Her tears flowed as she told God she had faith He could bring her son back to health again.

While driving back to campus that evening, Charley remarked that the woman really did believe God would perform a miracle even though the medical diagnosis was terminal. Were her prayers heard? Were they answered? Her son died a few weeks later. Did she lose faith? I never saw her again, but the transcendent fervor of her prayer convinces me she held true and strong. Her whole life had been one of coping, and her faith was the one great strength she had on her side.

Looking back, I think that trip to that country church was a turning point in my adjustment to college. I realized I was discovering new realities and moving into larger worlds. Some truths I was learning were unpleasant, even downright painful, but my own problems paled into insignificance, in comparison. I continued to torment Charley with dormitory pranks, but I think he was secretly pleased. He must have sensed I was going to make it now. He knew I was learning even about faith itself.

In the intervening years, I have studied and taught at major research universities. As a college president, I have insisted on the highest academic standards we can muster. I live by reason, continue to learn, and seek to think through any and all problems that arise. Yet, my strongest image of faith remains that farm woman praying for her son. Long ago, I realized that, when the embellishments of life are stripped away, when we are down to the basics, we all are like her—we can only live by faith. For that, we need the strength she had that comes from the grace of God.

The drought broke the following spring. Charley and I remain friends.

God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it. 1 Corinthians 10:13 NRSV

.....

THE SECOND MEETING



A SAMARITAN IN THE CROWD

Thomson K. Mathew
Dean
School of Theology and Missions
Oral Roberts University
Tulsa, Oklahoma

IT WAS A SOUTH INDIAN SUNNY DAY. Thiruvalla, home of the famous Mar Thomas College in Kerala State, was preparing to greet India's lady prime minister, Indira Gandhi, who was scheduled to pass through the city to speak at a large political rally. I was an undergraduate at Mar Thoma College, where classes were dismissed early to allow students to catch a glimpse of Javaharlal Nehru's daughter.

I stood in the midst of a huge crowd that seemed to grow as the temperature rose. Hundreds of Hindus, Muslims, and others were filling the city center where Mrs. Gandhi was scheduled to make a brief stop. With the rising heat and the crowd pressing around me, I began to feel sick. Suddenly, I passed out.

I awoke on a table in a nearby teashop. Next to me stood the man who apparently had carried me into that place. He had my books in his hands. The stranger brought me something to drink and made sure that I was okay. Once he was certain that I was fine, he gave me my books and began to leave. I thanked him for his kindness and asked him who he was. He smiled and simply said, "I am a Christian." Then he was gone. I have never seen him since.

A Christian among a multitude of Hindus and Muslims cared for me! Were I not a Christian, I would have become one that day. I was so touched by this modern Good Samaritan that I wanted to be one. That desire led me to become a chaplain and eventually a professor of pastoral care.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. 2 Corinthians 1:3, 4 NIV

.....