

# 3 MINUTES TO GOD



# 3 MINUTES TO GOD

SHOOTING COWS...  
AND 49 OTHER WAYS TO SEE  
GOD IN YOUR LIFE.

*by*

WADE GRASSEDONIO

## WHAT OTHERS ARE SAYING

### ABOUT THIS BOOK:

“3 Minutes to God - Shooting Cows... is brilliant in its simplicity. Wade Grassedonio uses a blend of hilarious and poignant personal stories that relate to us while revealing deep insights about God. The end result is a better understanding of how God wants to work in our lives on a daily basis.”

**Pastor Bil Cornelius, Bil Cornelius TV, Author  
“I Dare You to Change”, Lead/Founding  
Pastor of Bay Area Fellowship  
(one of the 100 largest churches in America)**

"Wade is one of the best story tellers I've ever known. He captures the deeper lessons of life found in every day experiences... and has a way of making you laugh as you turn every page."

**Pete Johnson, Sr. Regional Director for Young Life**

“Wade Grassedonio is a professional storyteller. He knows how to tell a story, make you laugh, and show you the lessons to be learned from life's ups and downs. He will keep you guessing what happens next and challenge your heart with the application.”

**Thomas Weaver, Pastor, Logos Community Church**

“Full of self-deprecating humor, Grassedonio finds evidence of God’s love—and wit—in both everyday events and outrageous moments. His insights, as well as this collection of anecdotes, are a divine gift.”

**Shannon Trial, Teacher, Photographer**

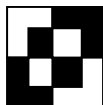
"Excellent storytelling that takes both humorous and sober approaches to uncovering profound truths in everyday occurrences. This book will make you laugh out loud, ponder the sacredness of life, and be in awe of the mysterious love of God."

**Kari Kurz, Young Life Staff**

"Heartfelt stories full of inspiration and truths that can be applied to our everyday lives."

**Tiffany Kayes, Teacher**

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3 Minutes To God Shooting Cows...and 49 other ways to see God in your life!

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Published in Corpus Christi, Texas by Bigger Picture Publishing.

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

**M**Y first and foremost thanks and appreciation go to Jesus Christ. It is because of Him that I have been able to write this book, live the stories contained therein and enjoy a life of love, freedom and salvation. Without Him, there is no true meaning in life. My most sincere thanks to Him for all He has done for me and my family.

Thank you to my wife, Kimberly, and our kids: Jack, Matthew and Catherine. You have been gracious in putting up with my craziness, time constraints and unique sense of humor. Thank you for loving me.

A big thank you goes out to the following people for helping to edit my book and more.

Johnnie Wesson – you are a great mother-in-law.

Hank Nuss – thanks for the brutal honesty.

Brian Enos – thanks for your humor and honesty.

Claire Grassedonio – thanks for the hard work, perseverance, honesty and being the best Mom in the world.

Shannon Trial – thanks for the extra work.

Kari Kurz – thanks for your example, faith and how you love kids.

Ken White – thanks for your friendship, honesty, willingness to hold me accountable, and your model of living the Christian faith.

Lauren Brown – thanks for all the work you did on the cover of this book.

### **3 MINUTES TO GOD**

Last but certainly not least, my humble thanks to The United States of America for the opportunities and freedom it provides. May we remain a Christian nation, united and strong!

## **I NEED YOUR HELP!!!**

Since this book is part of my ministry, I am giving it away for free in electronic format. It will make a great Christmas and/or birthday gift. Please spread the word to everyone you know, especially pastors, priests, those in youth ministry and all others who will enjoy it and/or find it a useful ministry tool.

In hopes of making up for the expenses associated with the production of this work, I am asking a special favor of readers. If, when you have finished reading this book you find it has touched your life in any way please go to [lulu.com](http://lulu.com) and purchase a hardcopy (or maybe 100). It will help me greatly. I REALLY appreciate your help and generosity!!

## **BE PUBLISHED IN MY NEXT BOOK!!**

3 Minutes to God is intended to be a series of books and I need your help. I am currently looking for stories I can use in the next book. They can be funny, serious, poignant, outlandish or anything else – but they must be clean. If you haven't thought of a way to relate them to God, it's ok. I'll take care of that.

Send your story, in 300 words or less, to [threeminutestoGod@yahoo.com](mailto:threeminutestoGod@yahoo.com) I'll review it and if your story is chosen, I will send you a free, signed hardcopy of the book when it is published.



# INTRODUCTION

**T**HIS book is written with one goal in mind – to help you grow closer to God and, hopefully, laugh along the way.

God is all around us and involved in every part of our lives. He loves us beyond belief, has gone to great lengths to prove it and has a great sense of humor too. He communicates with us constantly and we can, with practice, learn to hear what He is saying.

It is my most sincere prayer that you will gain insight into God's personality, teachings and how much He loves you. Enjoy!



# THE OLD SNAKE IN THE BED TRICK

**O**K, OK...so I put a snake in a guy's bed once. What's the big deal? It was a long time ago. Besides, it was really funny. At least I thought so...and so did a few other guys.

Let me set the scene. It took place during a staff assignment at a summer camp in the Hill Country of Texas. A few of us were a little bored and began discussing what we could do with our time. Just then a camper came running up to show off a snake he had killed. Since the snake was not poisonous and safe to handle we held it up in admiration. Plenty of praise was given to the camper for a job well done and he beamed with pride. That's when it happened – the lull in the conversation that was just long enough for us to start thinking about what we could do with a perfectly good, dead snake.

I must admit that I was the one who devised the plan. I'm gifted that way. The first thing we had to do was come up with a victim. A few names were thrown out, but we quickly agreed on a fellow staffer who was very popular and funny. He loved to play tricks on other people and thus made himself the perfect target. His name was Jeff, and it was time for him to receive some of what he had been dishing out.

We went to Jeff's room when no one was around and found some dirty clothes on his bed. We removed a shirt, placed the snake on his bed in the striking position, and even propped its mouth open with a stick. At first glance, it really looked like the snake was striking... BEAUTIFUL! We gently placed the shirt back on top of the snake and slithered out of the room undetected.

Several hours later, Jeff snuck up behind me and punched me in the

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back as hard as he could. He was mad. We got him and he knew it. Even though his anger level was almost off the charts, he still had respect for a brilliant plan that went off flawlessly. That was probably the only thing that kept us out of a fight.

As it turns out, Jeff was away doing laundry when we placed the snake in his bed. When he returned to gather the rest of his dirty clothes, he quickly snatched the shirt off the top of the snake. The initial appearance of a snake ready to strike made him immediately start the “sissy dance” and stumble backward into the wall. He literally could not breathe. Yes! Success!!

That is truly one of the better memories of my teen years. It just worked so well!

The real beauty of that episode is that we were able to scare the wits out of Jeff without there being any real danger. Many times life is that way with us. We are frightened by many things: poverty, disapproval, rejection, success, pain, death, accidents, failure, etc. Have you ever noticed, though, that our biggest fears rarely, if ever occur, and if they do, they are usually not as bad as we had anticipated?

If you have faith in God, then technically, there is not any reason to be frightened. He is in control, good and trustworthy. Even if He allows you to go through something very difficult, you can believe that, with faith in Him, it will work out for the best. How cool is that? No matter how bad it gets, or we think it will get, if we trust in Him, it will work out for our wellbeing.

Please don't think that I have learned to control all of my fears. I assure you that is not the case. Fear, in general, is one of the things that I have to constantly fight in myself. I do my best to overcome it, but sometimes it still gets the best of me. That is when I realize I have let my faith slip and have retaken control of my life from God. When I give the control back to Him, the fears subside and I go on down the road.

So, whatever is scaring you, be it a dead snake or something else, realize that “the bark is usually worse than the bite.” Give the control back to God and relax. He is reliable, and you can trust Him to take care of your life.



## SHOOTING COWS

Love a lot and laugh a lot. It's the best thanks you can give Him.



# BICYCLE EMBARRASSMENT

**I**T was a great day at Texas A & M University. The weather could not have been better—sunny and hot with a light wind, a perfect day for cycling, except for the heavy traffic in and around campus.

My roommate, Mike Kennedy, and I were riding our bikes home from class together. We were talking and laughing, having a great time as we rode. Like most guys, we always had an undercurrent of competition between us, and it was this competitive force that was the impetus behind the forthcoming debacle.

When we reached the intersection at Bizzell St. and George Bush Drive, our journey was halted by a red light. We were in the front of the line of traffic and would soon have the right of way going through the intersection. “When it turns green, we race all the way home.” Mike challenged. My reply was short, “You’re a dead man.”

As the seconds ticked by, we rotated our pedals to the optimum starting position and gripped the handlebars tightly in preparation for an explosive start. Tension built as time dwindled. I nervously glanced around the intersection and noticed that all ten lanes were full. It excited me to see that we had an audience because it would add to his humiliation when I jumped out into the lead.

The light turned green and much to my horror, Mike shot past me. In a matter of a few feet, I was looking at his backside as he pulled away. I grit my teeth and dug deep, pushing my body to the limit. It was no use. He was going to whip me.

Just then, the unthinkable happened. As Mike attacked with every bit of weight and strength he could muster, his pedal came off. It just fell off the crank arm. (Yeah, God.) He rocketed straight down onto

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the pavement like he had fallen from a building. Instantly, there was a tangled pile of bike and Mike right in the middle of the intersection.

Explosive laughter burst forth, and I had to hit the brakes to keep myself from crashing. The intensity of my laughter made it so that I couldn't remain standing. Like a drunken idiot, I pulled my bike to the nearest corner and lay on the sidewalk, holding my stomach, howling. I watched as Mike gathered himself up and made his way toward me. Through tear-filled eyes, I looked around the intersection and saw that every person in every car was beside themselves with laughter. Traffic was not even moving on a green light because all of the drivers were laughing too hard to proceed safely. To tell the truth, I am not sure if they were laughing at Mike's crash or at me for laughing so hard at him...or possibly both. Either way, it just may be the hardest I have ever laughed in my life. I still laugh about that incident whenever it comes to mind.

Well, we all know what goes around comes around, so I knew that, eventually, the time would come when I would end up on the receiving end of some terribly embarrassing incident. As it turns out, it was later that same year.

It was a sunny, frigid day with a light wind. The incredibly thick coat I was wearing made it a pleasure to be riding my bike. Only two things bothered me: my backpack, which was very confining over such a thick coat and the fact that I had forgotten my gloves. My hands were aching from the cold.

As I neared the end of my journey into the heart of the Texas A & M University campus, I noticed what appeared to be a very attractive blonde walking down the sidewalk. In a matter of seconds I would be alongside her and have the chance to smile, wave and, who knows, if I was lucky, strike up a conversation with her.

Just as I entered her field of view, she turned and looked at me. She was gorgeous. I tried my best to act cool, smile and wave. Just as I did my front tire fell into a large crack in the middle of the street. The jolt knocked my foot off of the pedal, under my back tire, and I ran over my own leg! The force of it pulled me off the bike and onto the pavement.

I landed on my hands and knees and did that “little kid hand slap” on the ground which sent stinging pain rifling up my arms and into every square inch of my body. Before I could even stop skidding, everything went black because my coat and backpack flipped up and over my head like a cape gone awry.

For a split second I pondered my options....there weren't any. I wrestled with my backpack, which was full of heavy books, and finally freed myself from it. Then, with great trepidation, I pushed the coat off of my head and glanced over toward the girl. She was staring and laughing! At that moment, I had a choice to make: get mad and storm off in a huff looking like an idiot, or laugh at myself and walk off looking like less of an idiot, but still an idiot. I chose to laugh and leave the scene in total humiliation.

Later, when I told Mike and our friends about the incident, they fell apart laughing. I had received my paycheck.

Vince Lombardi, arguably the best football coach in history said, “The greatest accomplishment is not in never falling, but in rising after you fall.” That is so true. It is not the fall that is important, but the getting up afterward. That is when you will really make an impression on others. Sure, people may laugh at you when you fall, but they will learn from you when you get up, laugh at yourself and move on with your life.

It seems that one of the biggest fears people have is that of looking stupid in front of other people. We will go to great lengths to avoid it. We act like we will be physically injured if it happens. Why? I don't know. I suppose part of it is just a human reaction to embarrassment, but the other part is wrapped in the fear of rejection and insecurity.

A minister once told me, “You wouldn't worry so much about what other people think of you, if you knew how seldom they actually do.” I contemplated that thought and realized that he was right. Most people spend the vast majority of their time thinking about themselves, their lives, and what they are going to do next. They spend very little time thinking about you or me. What a relief!

Life lived in fear is no life at all, and it is not the way God meant for us to live. Take a look at the life of Jesus. He never let fear rule Him

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or even make Him hesitate in the accomplishment of his mission. He loved with wild abandon and made the most of life, which is living *for* God and others, not *in fear of* God and others.

Jesus was laughed *at*, or maybe I should say mocked and ridiculed. He knows what it feels like. Ironically, though, it was God who created laughter. I believe that he had a great sense of humor and used it often. I believe that He cracked up His disciples frequently and probably told jokes to the people as He preached. Think about it. The Bible says that Jesus is God, the same God who created the world and everything in it.<sup>1</sup> Well, happiness, joy, and laughter are big parts of this world. Why would God visit earth in the form of Jesus and leave out one of the best parts of His creation, humor. It doesn't make sense. I believe that Jesus was able to laugh *at* Himself and *with* others, but always in a loving way and never at another's expense. He was humble, and a big part of humility is being able to laugh at yourself.

In the two bicycle crashes mentioned earlier, Mike and I laughed at each other and ourselves. We did not try to act cool or blame something or someone else. We made the best of embarrassing situations and let them bring us closer together. True friends will laugh with you instead of at you, especially if you are able to laugh at yourself. Laughter deepens friendships and enriches life. Let yourself loose. Laugh...especially at yourself.

Love a lot and laugh a lot. It's the best thanks you can give Him.

## GETTING A FACIAL

**G**UACAMOLE on my face! That's what I was thinking. No, I wasn't *thinking* it, I knew it! Almost every magazine ad I've ever seen for a spa has a close up of a lady who appears to be enjoying some kind of green, guacamole type of spackle that is smeared all over her face. That, in addition to many other *manly* reasons, is why I have always declined when my wife has asked me to accompany her to the spa for a facial.

Well, when we were enjoying a weekend together in San Antonio, she finally wore me down. With MAJOR reservations and great deal of resentment, I relented. She knows me and how I don't like surprises when it comes to situations where I'm uncomfortable, so she took me to preview the place.

I felt like a child going to kindergarten for the first time: nervous, apprehensive, timid. We were only able to see the lobby, but that was enough to make my palms sweat. It looked nice, but I felt as out of place as a hamster at a rattlesnake show.

The next morning I showed up, *by myself*, because my wife had an earlier appointment. My hands were sweating again and I was trying to act cool. No chance. I felt, acted, and looked like a moron. I even spilled coffee on the front of my pants.

My time was up and a guy – *A GUY!!!!* – came to get me. The scene I had played out in my mind was of a girl giving me the facial. The thought of a man doing it never even entered my mind. I know, it may be perfectly normal, but I received a professional massage from a man once and it just didn't seem right. Luckily, this fellow was only giving me a tour of the facilities. *When!*

So, outfitted in a robe and some goofy-looking shower shoes, I

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headed for the steam room. I walked in and found it was already occupied. Since I was awash in insecurity and not in the mood to make small talk, I left and went to the hot tub.

It felt great, but sitting on the edge was a bowl full of sliced cucumbers which brought back the certainty of treatments involving guacamole on my face. I sat there stewing in my own misery, trying to relax, wondering how in the heck I got there and what would happen next.

When the steam room was finally vacated, I went in and gave it a try. The heat was soothing, and I actually started to relax until the mechanism that creates the steam activated. Out of the silence, came a huge crash followed by loud hissing, which scared me to death. A gigantic cloud of steam started rolling at me, and I knew it was going to burn. There was no getting away. I held my breath and braced for the worst. It was really hot, but I didn't die. *When!* The hissing stopped and I took it easy. Time passed and I started to relax again, until...another minor explosion and steam cloud. It was time to leave. I couldn't take it anymore. So, I went to the "quiet room" to wait for the person who would do my facial. I meditated on what I was doing there and if I should write this story at all or just hold it in and let it destroy my life.

A girl (yes! a girl) came and got me for the facial. We went through the whole process – lotions, creams, deep pore cleansing etc. – and it was actually pretty relaxing. Afterward, I went to change back into my regular clothes and escape, but I had lost the key to my locker! *Agh!*

All in all, it really was not that bad, and my wife was happy with me. If I could master the art of relaxing on command, it might have even been pleasant. Will I do it again? No! Can I believe I just wrote this story? No! Please don't hold it against me.

When I re-live the event (I would say reminisce, but that implies fondness) I can see that my preconceived ideas and apprehension caused many things to get blown out of proportion in my mind. The result was that they sucked almost all of the enjoyment out of the experience.

In the same way, when many people think about becoming a Christian or investigating God further, they get apprehensive and



nervous. They think they will suddenly be thrust into a life full of rules that will replace happiness with guilt.

That, however, is not the case. In fact, the opposite is true. When a person becomes a Christian, freedom and joy abound. It is a very liberating experience. Many people say that the moment they accepted Jesus into their hearts and turned their lives completely over to Him, they felt like a weight had been lifted from their shoulders. And why wouldn't they feel like that? They have just had their sins forgiven, no longer feel like they have to control everything, and are now having their lives guided by God instead of being commanded by sin. It's awesome.

If you are investigating God and Christianity at this point in your life, please keep it up. Find a good peer group in a mainstream Christian church and through them, as well as prayer, Bible study and the pastor, God will reveal Himself to you. The Bible says "Seek and you shall find."<sup>2</sup> That is God's promise to us, and He always keeps his promises. He will reveal Himself in ways that you haven't even thought of yet. Persevere; you'll be glad you did. Oh, and hold on for the ride because it gets exciting.

Love a lot and laugh a lot. It's the best thanks you can give Him.



## KICKING WAVES

**H**AVE you ever watched a three-year-old at the beach get smashed by a wave and have so much saltwater in his eyes and nose that he just turns toward shore and cries? That is what I witnessed one day when I was at the beach with my kids. Matthew, my youngest, was doing his best to karate kick the waves as they came at him. (Granted, the waves were only one and a half feet high, but when your entire stature is only two and a half feet, those are big waves.) Every time he kicked at one, he would get water in his eyes and up his nose. It didn't take long for him to figure out that the fun was not worth the misery.

We returned to the shore to play in the sand, but after just a few minutes he said, "I want to karate chop those waves." I tried to talk him out of it, but nooooo.... He headed back out, but this time, he turned toward me and stuck out his hand. "Hold my hand, Dad," he said. I took his hand and he proceeded to kick the daylights out of every wave that came at him. He was still getting water in his eyes and up his nose, but with me holding his hand, he could endure. Everything was the same, the waves, the wind, the stinging in his eyes and sinuses, with one exception: I was holding his hand, and that made it all better. He felt safe. He knew it would all be OK as long as Dad was holding his hand. So, he kicked and kicked and taught those waves a lesson they won't soon forget.

Life is a lot like that for us. We get hit repeatedly with problems, and there does not seem to be any end in sight. We have the same kind of stinging in the eyes, but it is from tears, not saltwater. We have the same level of fatigue, but it is from stress and overwork, not fighting waves. We have either chosen to turn toward shore and cry or get tough and

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force our way through. Since we cannot get out of “the water” because the water represents life itself, those are the only two options. Right?! I say, “No!”

There is another option and that is whether or not to take the hand of Dad. The world tells us not to. It tells us we should get tough, fight, and do it on our own. Where does that get us, though? It gets us nowhere. We are still floundering in the water, getting hammered by the same waves. The only difference is that we end up even more exhausted and frustrated than before.

God is our father, and He longs to take our hand. He will not pull us from the water, but with Him at our side, we can get through it. Who knows, we may even begin to enjoy it and “karate chop” the waves to our heart’s content.

I think far too many people are just enduring life. They just try to make it from one day to the next. Life is not made for that! It is made for us to enjoy. No, we can’t be happy all of the time, but we can be joyous. There is a huge difference between happiness and joy. Happiness is based on outside events, while joy is based on the deep inner knowledge and security that God is in control and will take care of us – kind of like Matthew knowing that it would all be OK as long as I held his hand.

God is there for you no matter what. Just take his hand, trust Him and start enjoying instead of enduring.

Love a lot and laugh a lot. It’s the best thanks you can give Him.

# INVENTIONS & BOMBS & PRISON, OH MY!

**Y**ES, it's true. I invented a coffee maker that was so heinous I almost ended up in prison in a foreign country.

It all started one morning when I woke to a very common problem. I had forgotten to set the timer on the coffee maker, and my coffee was not ready. You have to realize that I'm a coffee drinker – big time! I'm not a Starbucks, Mocha Latte, foo-foo coffee snob, just a plain ole Folgers guy. I'm not high maintenance; I do not even take anything in it. The only thing I require is black coffee, and, on that particular morning, there wasn't any! It frustrated me badly, and I decided there had to be a better way. Eventually, I wound up inventing a new type of coffee maker. It may have been genius, but it was ugly, so ugly I called the prototype Frankencoffee.

A company in Canada liked the idea and they flew me up to Montreal to see about buying it. The trip was exciting and everything went really well until the journey home. I tightly crated the machine in a wooden box and secured it safely with what seemed like a million screws. Since I did not want to haul my tools with me, I put them into the box before closing it and borrowed a screwdriver from the hotel to seal it.

When I arrived at the airport I prepared Frankencoffee to be x-rayed. I placed it at the mouth of the machine and watched it disappear. Everything went smoothly during the trip up, so I should not have had any problems on the way back, right?! Wrong! When the x-ray technician viewed the contents, he did not see a coffee maker. Instead, he saw a tangle of wires, motors, tools, etc...in essence, a bomb.

With a small amount of alarm, he pulled me from line, handed me

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“FrankenBOMB,” and in very broken English told me to wait by the baggage conveyor. I asked him whether or not I should put the crate onto the conveyor, and with French/Canadian disdain, he ignored me. So, with a hint of passive aggression and very little forethought, I placed Frankenbomb onto the conveyor and watched it disappear. Without knowing it, I had just put a “bomb” on an airplane. Thank goodness this was pre-9/11.

After a long while, the guard came to get me and questioned the whereabouts of the box. With slight defiance I pointed to the conveyor belt. He freaked out. He grabbed me by the arm, paraded me past all of the people in the x-ray line and sat me in a chair far enough away from everyone so as to be alone, but close enough for everyone to point and stare. He motioned for me to stay put while the airline unloaded the entire plane in an effort to retrieve my “bomb.”

After a long, nerve racking wait, a group of angry guards, “bomb” in hand, came and got me. They were neither nice nor polite. They were upset and wanted me to know it.

They brought me to a back room that was barren except for lighting and carpet. It was one of those rooms that you hope you never see in real life, an interrogation room of sorts. I tried to talk to them and it quickly became evident that none of them spoke English. I don't speak French, and the language barrier added yet another layer to our problems.

Using a compilation of hand gestures and broken English, they asked what was in the box. I tried to tell them, but since it was a new invention and no one had ever seen one before, the effort was futile. If you combine the factors of a “bomb,” irritated guards, a language barrier, and no tools with which to open the stupid box, you end up with a very tense situation.

Finally, someone found a screwdriver and I was able to open the box and show them that it was not a bomb. Everyone relaxed and I was still able to catch my plane. Whew! That was scary.

On the flight home, the adrenalin started to wear off and visions

from the movie “Midnight Express” began to fade from my mind. Thoughts of how this episode relates to life began drift in.

You see, I believe that life itself is an expression of God, so I try to find both God and His lessons in life’s everyday happenings. In this fiasco, I found myself being like the box. Maybe you will, too.

On the outside is a tough exterior designed to protect the secrets on the inside. It is not impervious, however, and can be broken in two ways. It can be crushed by the rough times in life or opened with care by me. Either way the secrets are revealed – that is the scary part. The difference in the two revelations is whether the deepest most delicate parts are made public in the middle of trauma and catastrophe or vulnerability and safety.

God is the x-ray machine in the airport. He can see what is on the inside. He sees the tangled mess of wires and motors, sins and shortcomings. He sees how ugly and fragile all of it is...and He loves us. He sees something else too...He sees potential.

That is the great thing about God. He sees us just the way we are with all of our secrets and flaws, and He sees our potential, too.

Our secrets hinder our potential. In fact, it is a widely-held belief that it is our secrets that keep us imprisoned. They take away our freedom to live and act as God wants us to because in order to keep them hidden, we have to act in ways that degrade and demoralize us. We have to lie or avoid certain people or topics of conversation. We have to do whatever it takes to avoid depth in relationships. We have to watch what we say and who we say it to. Secrets are a brake on life, the bars on the jail cell, if you will. They stop us from finding true meaning and love.

When you dig down deep enough, everyone wants same thing: to be truly known, secrets and all, and still be loved and accepted. When that becomes reality, it showers the object of that love with freedom, the freedom to live life to its fullest and experience heights of joy that are rarely achieved.

The Bible says that the truth will set you free.<sup>3</sup> I have found that to be an undeniable reality. Revealing the truth may be scary and very painful, but the freedom it affords is worth the costs.

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The Bible also says that Jesus died for us while we were still sinners.<sup>4</sup> He did not ask everyone to quit doing bad things and start doing good things *before* He sacrificed himself for us. No, He made the ultimate sacrifice for us as we are – secrets and all.

He wants us to open up the box, let the secrets out, accept His help in dealing with them, and get on with life. He gave us a wonderful world and wants us to enjoy it. Open up to him. Freedom will follow and it is worth it.

Love a lot and laugh a lot. It's the best thanks you can give him.



## WHAT IS IT?

“DADDY, Daddy! Look what I made for you.” That was the precursor to Matthew, who was two at the time, rushing around the corner with a huge smile on his face and a piece of paper in his hand. He thrust the paper out so we could both admire it at the same time. Sure, it was only a squiggly line in a very rough looking spiral, but it was his creation. He was so proud.

I responded, “Wow! That is beautiful. You did such a good job. Thank you so much.” His grin broadened and he raced off to show his brother, Jack. After all, if Dad liked it so much, Jack could really benefit by gazing on its beauty as well.

Jack, my eldest son, looked at it and, for an eight-year-old, did a really good job of complimenting him. Then he followed it up with, “What is it?” I was shocked. I was thinking that the typical sibling antagonism had surfaced, but there was no malice or bad intent in his voice. It was an honest question.

From the other room, I braced for the impending freak out. I just knew there were going to be hurt feelings that would lead to a fight. In fact, I even started toward the room to break it up and also teach Jack how to be more polite – even to his brother.

To my surprise, however, Matt was not hurt or taken off guard at all. He just looked at the drawing, briefly contemplated it, and said, “I don’t know.” *And he was OK with it!* I would have been hurt because Jack couldn’t tell what it was and mad at him for saying so. Meanwhile, my “sense of failure” meter would have maxed out and when that happens, bad things soon follow. Most of them are internal, but sometimes other people end up paying the price.

Matthew’s reaction, however, came as both a relief and something

### 3 MINUTES TO GOD

foreign to me. It was one of those things that sticks in my mind. (Whenever that happens, I go into a region of my brain that often develops into, “Hey, I have an idea...” which usually puts the people around me on guard.) But I digress.

As I thought through Matt’s response, it became clear that even though it appeared he only drew a picture for me, it was really a lot more than that. At his age, he cannot draw objects too well. He can, however, express himself while drawing...and that is what he was doing.

With pen in hand, he set out to express his emotions. He was not thinking of artistic expression, subject matter, or technique. He was thinking of Dad, his love for me and his desire to show it. So, he drew a squiggly line in a rough spiral and that was it. You see, it didn’t matter what he was drawing. The only things that mattered were that he was showing his love for Dad and he knew Dad would love and praise him for a job well done.

There are so many times that we buy into the idea that our lives have to be a work of art. The goal is to improve the picture day by day, so we feverishly erase and re-draw. Sometimes it is an improvement, sometimes it is busywork, and sometimes it is better off left alone. We do this for two reasons; one is that we have to do something with our waking hours that is “productive” (Heaven forbid we ever just sit quietly and spend time with God) and the other is that many of us are hoping our “artwork” will be good enough to gain God’s approval.

The speed and focus of our lives leaves us feverishly working on the process while forgetting about the goal. We get so bogged down in the details that we lose sight of the big picture and what is really important.

God says if we want to please Him, we should love Him and live for Him. If we do that, everything else will fall into place.<sup>5</sup> So what do we do? We get it turned around backwards. Instead of loving Him and leaving everything for Him to work out, we try to work everything out so He will love us.

Let me tell you a little secret that is terribly difficult for many people to accept: He loves you just the way you are, and you can’t do a darn thing about it.

## SHOOTING COWS

So, maybe instead of working so hard on our “art project,” we should just draw – even if we “don’t know what it is!” He will love you, I promise. I know because He loves me and that is saying a lot!

Love a lot and laugh a lot. It’s the best thanks you can give Him.



# TEENAGERS

**T**HOSE @#\$\$%@ teenagers! Sure, we've all said it, and granted, many times they have earned it, but let me tell you two true stories that may help you see teenagers in a slightly different light.

Young Life, a Christian ministry to high-school kids, has a camp for mentally and physically disabled students that is designed for maximum enjoyment by kids with disabilities. The staff knows that extra help and care are involved and have designed the system so each camper has his or her own helper for the week. The aide is by the camper's side one hundred percent of the time and helps with everything. It is a very demanding job and takes a special person with tremendous love and commitment. The most remarkable aspects of these helpers are that all of them are volunteers, and every one of them is one of those @#\$\$%@ teenagers.

The first story is about a beautiful girl named Erin. Erin has a mental disability and decided to give Young Life's summer camp a try. During the week, Erin's aide poured her life into her and, by way of example, helped Erin see God's love for her. At the end of camp, Erin, nervous and hesitant, stood up in front of several hundred people and said, "I learned that I'm not a mistake, but that I'm God's masterpiece." WOW!

The second story is about Chris, a teenager confined to a wheelchair. He took the challenge and went to a standard Young Life camp with all of his able-bodied friends. After a really long bus trip, they finally arrived. The kids were so ready to stretch their legs that they ran out of the bus, down a large set of wooden stairs and into camp. In all of the excitement, Chris was left behind. He couldn't descend the stairs without help. His leaders didn't notice his plight because they were

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busy unpacking the bus. So, he sat alone at the top of the stairs and watched the other kids have fun.

At that moment, a staff member noticed him. He held his hand up to Chris, said “Wait a minute,” and ran off. Chris was curious what he was doing and wondered why he didn’t help him down the stairs. The man quickly returned and, with Chris’s dignity in mind, quickly built a ramp.

Chris rolled *himself* down the new ramp and into camp. He looked back toward his leaders who were now gathered at the top of the stairs and said, with tears in his eyes, “They really want me here!”

The things that choke me up are that Erin actually thought she was a mistake and Chris thought no one *really* wanted him. I believe that we sometimes think those things about ourselves. Maybe you don’t, but I do.

The reality, though, is that God created us, and He never makes mistakes, only masterpieces. He looks at us, sees His beloved children, and feels overwhelming love and compassion.

He didn’t create us and then decide that He doesn’t want us. There may be times when we think He couldn’t want us because we’ve done something shameful and feel guilty. Those are our feelings, however, not His. He proved this by dying on the cross for us and rising from the dead. By doing so, He made it easy for us to get into heaven and be with Him for eternity. All we have to do is ask Jesus to come into our hearts, forgive our sins, and lead our lives. It’s that easy.

If He didn’t want us or thought we were mistakes, He would never have made it so simple for us to be in a relationship with Him. Think about that! Really think about that! It’s awesome!

Love a lot and laugh a lot. It’s the best thanks you can give Him.

# UH OH!

**I**T'S hard to beat the enjoyment of scuba diving in the Gulf of Mexico, and on this particular trip, the conditions were perfect: warm weather, calm wind, and clear water. It was the day of my final check-out dive, and upon completion I would receive my open-water scuba diving certification. I couldn't wait.

Our dive boat was packed with people and gear as we headed out to explore the sub-surface structure of the oil rigs located just off the coast of Corpus Christi, Texas. Over time, the legs and braces of the platforms become natural attractants for marine life and are therefore, great places to scuba dive. As soon as we secured the boat at the first dive site, the instructor and I initiated my final check-out dive. It went very well, and immediately afterward, I changed air tanks and went back down with my best friend, Mike Kennedy – and a five-foot spear gun. (Wisdom was not my strong suit at eighteen.)

Spear guns are simple but dangerous weapons. They shoot heavy, solid metal spears that are propelled with incredible force by ridiculously large rubber bands. The spear is attached to the gun via a steel cable, and after each shot the diver must retrieve the spear and re-cock the gun to be able to shoot again.

Mike and I were taking turns shooting (maybe missing is more accurate) and having a great time. Our enjoyment was only limited by the amount of air left in our tanks, or so we thought. It was then that an accident occurred which used up eight of Mike's nine lives.

Mike had just completed his turn by missing his target, *again*, and it was finally my turn to be the underwater Rambo. I stealthily snuck up on an unsuspecting fish, shot...and missed. Darn the luck. I had to re-cock the gun, which was a very difficult task, and as I did, two things

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happened. First, I lost track of my dive buddy (that's a no-no), and second, I unknowingly rotated backward in the water, which put Mike directly in the sights of the spear gun. When I finally finished cocking all three Godzilla-sized rubber bands, the gun fired. Without warning and before I could remove my fingers, the gun misfired, catapulting the spear forward at blinding speed.

The rubber bands ripped through my fingers and left them throbbing in pain as I tried to understand what had just happened. It all came together in milliseconds, and I begrudgingly began to retrieve the spear. When I reached for the cable, I was shocked to see that it led right to Mike's head. I was instantly overwhelmed with fear. Evidently, Mike was overwhelmed, too because his mask could barely contain his pancake-sized eyes. The spear had threaded the gap between the snorkel and his head. It actually went through his hair!

We passed the hand sign for "OK" back and forth. He was OK and that meant I was OK. Thank God! Other hand signs followed (just kidding). (He got me back later with the help of a huge, angry barracuda, but that's another story.)

God used this incident to get our attention (boy, did it get our attention) and to teach us a few things. The biggest lesson is that, no matter how well you have life planned, unforeseen events will occur and drastically change its direction. Sometimes the things that happen are painful, and oftentimes it is your friends and family who cause the pain. In fact, it's the pain caused by those nearest to us that hurts the most and is the hardest to forgive.

Being underwater when this incident took place could have been disastrous if Mike had been hit. It was, however, a good thing because it kept us from screaming, shouting, or fighting. It made us get past all of that and focus on the most important thing – "Are you OK?"

Friends and family hurt each other occasionally. It is unavoidable. When it happens, though, get past all of the knee-jerk reactions and focus on the deeper concern of, "Are you OK?" That is where truth and love reside – in caring for others before ourselves.

When Jesus was on earth, He knew what was in store for Him,



that His enemies were going to torture and kill Him. It was his friends, however, who probably hurt Him the most. Sure, He had foreknowledge of that, too, but it still has to hurt when, in your biggest time of need, your friends leave you high and dry. One of them, Peter, even cursed for emphasis as he denied knowing Jesus. Think about the pain, loneliness, and betrayal Jesus must have felt.

Now, jump ahead to what He did in response to the pain and rejection. He said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing.” Let’s follow His lead and treat others and ourselves like that. Let’s forgive even when we feel like have a right to hold a grudge. It’s possible – VERY difficult, but possible. Try it. Ask God for the necessary help and strength. He’ll give it to you. You can do it!

Love a lot and laugh a lot. It’s the best thanks you can give Him.



# SHOOTING COWS

**D**EAFENING screams, sweat, thorns, and being stranded made up a good part of our family weekend at the ranch. However, if you read on, you'll see why I count the experience a privilege and not an ordeal I managed to survive.

All of the above happened while taking both of my sons for a ride on our four-wheeler. Matthew (1 ½) was seated firmly in front of me, and Jack (6) held on from behind as we deftly stalked the *wild and cagey* cattle that roam the plains.

When we finally got within shooting range of a really big one, Jack nervously readied his Frisbee gun and prepared to shoot. Just as he was squeezing the trigger, Matt's excitement got the best of him and burst forth in that ear-piercing shriek that only a toddler can produce. That scared the prey, and the low-speed chase was on (it's bad to run cattle, you know). The wind was blowing, Matt was squealing, and Jack was screaming, "I'm the cow king." Meanwhile, the thorn bushes were smacking me in the legs, and, yes, of course, I was wearing shorts.

During the next two hours we had several more chances for Jack to score, but none proved successful. Each time we'd get close enough for Jack to shoot, he would get "buck fever" (or should I say "cow fever") and freeze. The cows would use the extra time to escape and we'd go on our way, screaming as we went, to the next potential trophy.

(Hold your judgment on Jack and his hunting abilities until you take into consideration the intimidation a child feels when being stared down by a vicious, fire breathing bovine. At least that's what it looks like from the point of view of a six-year-old about to shoot a cow, at close range, with a miniature Frisbee.)

Later, Jack and I went out to do some man stuff. We went far away

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from the ranch house to a big, empty field, and, for the first time in his life, Jack was allowed to drive the four-wheeler all by himself. I set the throttle to go very slow and off he went. He was doing a great job, and I was beaming with pride until I realized that he was leaving me behind and going back to the house. Stranded by a six-year-old! He got me! I had to jog back.

Those events stirred up many emotions in me, especially during my run back to the house. Later, some interesting thoughts crept into my mind. I compared the experience of being a dad with his kids to what God may experience with us – His kids. You see, I didn't mind the sweat, thorns and screaming because my kids were having such a good time. Their joy gave me joy. Their job was to have fun while my job was to control the vehicle and make sure they remained safe. If the kids had spent their time stressing out over the details I was already managing, it would have ruined our time together.

Yet that is what we do so often during our journey with God. He is in control and wants us to relish the moments, but we keep ruining it by grabbing the steering wheel and reading road maps. We may mean well, but our efforts are based in fear, and the chief effect is that it takes the fun out of it. Stop! Let go and trust God! It is His job to drive; ours is to cut loose, feel the wind in our faces, and SCREAM AT THE "COWS!" Try it. What have you got to lose? (The cows won't mind, I promise.)

Love a lot and laugh a lot. It's the best thanks you can give Him.

## SEEMINGLY INSIGNIFICANT

**H**AVE you ever been hit in the face so hard that it knocks you back *into* reality? I'm not talking about physical assault – that usually knocks you *out* of reality. I'm referring to events in life that are so profound they reshape your point of view.

Recently, I attended a religious conference which featured a speaker named Fr. John Corapi. Fr. Corapi comes from a different place – both sides of the tracks. Before he became a Catholic priest, he was a member of the U.S. Special Forces, a self-made millionaire, and, for years, a homeless addict. To say he has *been there and done that* is an understatement.

I went to the conference to do the “religious conference thing”: listen to speakers, especially Fr. Corapi, get motivated and, hopefully, improve myself in some way. What I received, though, was something completely different, and none of it came from Fr. Corapi.

As I entered the auditorium, I noticed a young man with a severe disability. He was in a fully-mechanized wheelchair that had all kinds of special features designed to help him cope with the uniqueness of his posture and inability to control his arms and hands. Next to him sat his Dad, ready to care for his every need.

My seat happened to be four rows behind them, and, as the conference went on, I noticed the young man was receiving a neck massage from his father. Evidently, the distortions in his spine made his neck ache. (That is something that I have never thought about. It seems obvious that if I get sore from sitting too long – and God gifted me with a good back – that people with disabilities would get sore too. *Yes, I am the master of the obvious – sheesh!* How agonizing must it be to experience pain, be dependent on others for movement and, as was the case with this young man, have almost no ability to communicate?!)

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During the entire conference— and it was a long one— his father continued rubbing his neck. He never stopped or even rested. It was amazing to watch such profound, simple love in action. The task itself was insignificant; it was a neck massage. The love, selflessness, and commitment to his son were huge, though. There was very little verbal or visual communication between them, but the exchange of love was epic. The way the son moved his head in response to his father’s touch and the attempts he made to pat his Dad on the shoulder once in awhile screamed “thank you and I love you.”

Most of us would like to think of ourselves as being the “Dad” in this scenario. He is the one who has it all together and enjoys the self-sacrifice of caring for others. When it comes to the relationship between God and man, though, I think God likes to assume that role. Sure, one of His titles is “Father,” but at times, I think He may prefer “Dad.” It’s a less formal, more intimate title. He wants to be the caregiver, the one tirelessly rubbing our necks. He wants to be the one we can trust when we can’t do anything for ourselves.

We get so caught up in our performance, pleasing people and being *good enough* that we forget we need to be dependent on Him. A mentor once told me, “God doesn’t want what you *do*. He wants *you* – all of you.” We don’t have to perform for God or earn His love. He already loves us beyond what we can imagine. Sure, He loves everything we do for Him, but it is not a prerequisite to Him loving us. He wants to be our “Dad.” He wants to take care of our needs and desires, to make us happy and joyful. The question is...will we let Him? All we have to do is trust Him. It may be scary at first, but it’s worth it!

Love a lot and laugh a lot. It’s the best thanks you can give Him.

# INDIANA JONES & THOSE STINKIN' SNAKES

**I**F you ever saw the movie “Indian Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark,” you will remember the scene where Indy was surrounded by a sea of poisonous snakes and came face to face with a King Cobra. For what seemed an eternity, the cobra hovered inches from his face, ready to strike. That was the kind of scene that made the viewers shrink back into their seats and sweat. Well...it really happened to me.

Mike Kennedy and I took advantage of a mild, mid-summer cool front and went to the ranch to bowhunt for wild hogs. We had been hunting together for years and fostered a bond between us that is unbreakable. Sometimes our hunts turned out well and sometimes they didn't, but no matter what, we always had a great time.

That particular day, we had just started walking down a road that bordered a large field when we saw a pack of hogs feeding about forty yards away. There were so many pigs and it happened so quickly that when we dropped down to the ground to hide, we started laughing uncontrollably. We kept it as quiet as possible and somehow managed to remain undetected. It took us about five minutes to figure out the best strategy, and once we settled on one, we started to crawl into position. As soon as we began to move, I noticed a water moccasin about two feet in front of us. His mouth was open and he was coiled up ready to strike one of us – in the face. (In case you may not know, a water moccasin is a very poisonous snake that can be extremely aggressive.)

Immediately, I grabbed Mike by the shoulder and stopped him cold. He shot me a perturbed glance, but after following my gaze to the snake,

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quickly joined me in motionless panic. Slowly, ever so slowly, we backed out of striking distance.

After calming down a little and making sure we did not have to change our pants, we continued the stalk. Would you believe I actually bagged one? I have the pictures to prove it.

Snakes! Most people are instinctively repulsed by them and that's a good thing. But try being on your hands and knees when one is about to bite you in the face. You really won't like them after that. Take my word for it.

I think there are a several good reasons that God made satan (lower-case on purpose just to make him mad) appear as a snake in the Bible. The first is that they appear to be the personification of spiritual evil and the second is because they are so sneaky.

In the previously-mentioned story there were two of us (that is four eyeballs) on the ground facing in the direction of the snake, and we never saw him! We did not see him enter the scene, coil up, or even open his mouth. But, by the grace of God, literally, I saw him before we moved an inch closer.

I think Satan works this same way. It is when we think we have everything under control that he strikes where we least expect it – right in the face. How many times have you been tripped up by a sin that you swore you would never do or repeat? Afterward, you were probably left thinking “I swore I wouldn't do that and I did. How the...?” After awhile, that thinking leads to a devalued image of yourself, others, and your relationship with God.

Don't fall into that trap. Expect the attack *from the front* and *when it happens*, don't run yourself down. Go to God, ask for forgiveness, and then enjoy life to the best of your ability. It is what He wants.

Love a lot and laugh a lot. It's the best thanks you can give Him.



## SQUISHY SHOES

**I**T'S amazing how small things can trigger deep and wonderful memories. For my wife, Kimberly, it is the sound of walking in wet, squishy shoes. To me, that is the sound of discomfort and misery. To her, however, it is a trigger that releases a mental highlight reel depicting the times she spent with her Grandma and the warm feelings that accompanied them.

In particular, it reminds her of when they would go down to the creek that runs from the mountains, behind the house and out into the wilds. Together, they would laugh and play in the water to their heart's content. There was never a rush, and the fact that Kimberly got to pal around, alone, with Grandma was priceless. When the fun was over, they would walk back to the house in wet, squishy shoes. Unbeknownst to Kimberly, the sloshing sound etched a place in her heart and mind where the memories of her Grandma would forever live.

It has often been said that people don't remember what you say as much as what you do. That is very true, but it leads one to believe that only the big, intentional things are the ones that will be remembered. Sure, many of those will be recalled, but oftentimes, it is the small, insignificant things that implant themselves firmly in our hearts. They connect us to meaningful times in our past. They are the colors that give warmth and feeling to our reflections.

Jesus had a way of interacting with people that filled them with warmth and color. He loved unconditionally and gave of Himself to the point of death. Sure, His miracles attracted crowds, but I think it was the way He connected with people on an individual level that enticed them to become His followers.

In a much lesser but still significant way, we can do the same. It

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is not about accomplishments as much as it is about the essence of our being. It entails less of what you do and more of who you are. This quote, widely attributed to St. Frances of Assisi, sums it up best: “Preach the Gospel at all times and, when necessary, use words.” If we love Jesus, learn the Bible, and let Christ’s love flow through us each day, everything will take care of itself. The little things we do will take on eternal significance and touch others deeply.

People are watching us constantly: our friends, spouses, kids, and strangers. They are compiling memories each time we interact with them. Of all of the recollections that will be stored, only a handful will filter down into the most treasured area within their hearts. If we are living out the Gospel, the portion of that treasured area which pertains to us will be overflowing with warmth and color. There may be a few big events stored there, too, but the majority will be little things, even things as common as squishy shoes.

Love a lot and laugh a lot. It’s the best thanks you can give Him.

## PERCH & GOD

**I**T all started with a simple, little G.I. Joe fishing rod. Of all the kiddie fishing rods hanging on the rack at Wal-Mart, that was the one that caught the attention of my two-year-old son, Matthew. The camouflage paint virtually mesmerized him. He had never seen G.I. Joe, but somehow, he could instantly relate to the “man stuff” associated with him. Matt thought it was the coolest thing he’d ever seen. I was thinking about how we would lose it when we laid it down in the grass. (There I go with the “positive” thinking again!)

He snatched it from the shelf, tucked it tightly under one arm, secured it even more tightly with the other hand and marched the rest of the way through the store. He was so proud. I promptly offended him, however, by offering to carry it for him. What was I thinking?

He was so excited to go fishing that he carried his rod around the house all day and even took it in the car with him everywhere we went. When Kim, my wife, was doing errands, Matt was in the backseat fishing. Every so often, he would “hook a fish,” fight it while commentating at the top of his lungs, and then lose it. The loss would be followed by a big “Aaawww.”

Soon thereafter, I gathered the kids and we went to a nearby seawall to catch perch. It was not a “real fishing trip” by tough-guy standards, but to them it was an adventure with Dad, and that was better than a “real fishing trip” any day. Cool, huh?!

As we sat on the seawall, I was book-ended with kids. Matt was on my left and Jack, my eldest son, was on my right. Matt hooked a good sized perch and went ballistic with joy as he fought it. The look on his face was priceless as he watched the water, waiting for the fish to appear. He reeled as fast as he could, and when the fish finally broke the

### 3 MINUTES TO GOD

surface, mighty squeals were unleashed. “Fishy! Fishy!” I don’t believe any fishing show has ever caught anything like that on camera. I had to remind him to quit pointing at the fish and reel it all of the way up so I could reach it.

The fish were hitting quickly, and I was baiting hooks as fast as humanly possible. In an effort to reduce my workload, I decided to teach Jack how to bait his own hook. Bad idea! He was scared to death of hooking himself and his hesitancy made his worst fear come true. I think a hooked child fights harder than any fish.

When it was all said and done, Jack learned to bait a hook with a shrimp instead of his finger and even caught a really big perch. Matt landed seven perch, three of which he caught all by himself. He was so proud!

Its memories like these that we will always cherish. I was thinking about it later, and a quote I had read popped into mind. It was from a little kid. Someone had asked him how he knew God was real and he replied, “It’s like catching a fish. You can’t see it, but you can feel it pulling.” Doesn’t that just say it all?

Matt had experienced some of the greatest fulfillment life can throw our way. The look on his face, the movement of his body, the squeals of excitement and laughter all exhibited his joy. I think God is that way with us. He is fishing, so to speak. He is fishing for you and me. He loves fishing. In fact, most of his apostles were fishermen. However, instead of using a rod and reel to bring us in, He uses the life of His Son.

If people will humble themselves enough to thoroughly investigate the life of Christ, chances are they will get hooked. At that point, I think God just may have the same look of joy on his face that Matt did when he caught his first fish. And when we “come to the surface,” I think He gets so excited to see us that even He forgets to reel.

Think about it. If he is that serious about “fishing” for us, don’t you think He gets truly excited when He “catches” one of us? And you know what? With Him, there are no size limits and He never throws anyone back.

Love a lot and laugh a lot. It’s the best thanks you can give Him.

## PLANE CRASH

**N**AVY Pilots generally fit into one of two categories: intense and arrogant or light-hearted and humble. My friend, Dan, fits into the latter group. He's funny, cheerful, and an excellent pilot to boot.

As many pilots do, Dan got the itch to buy his own airplane and chose a single engine model called a Long EZ. It is a unique-looking craft with the propeller on the rear, no tail, and rudders on the tips of the wings. The horizontal stabilizer, which is normally located on the tail, is attached to the nose. Despite its unusual looks, it is very fuel-efficient, fast, and aerobatic. The cockpit is even set up in the same configuration as an F-16 fighter jet. What else could a pilot want?

Shortly after he bought it, Dan ventured out to practice nighttime touch-and-go's. A touch-and-go is an exercise where the pilot takes off and lands many times in a row without ever stopping on the ground. It is an excellent way to build skill and flight hours.

Everything was going well until Dan made his final takeoff. During climb out, one of the rudder cables wrapped around its control mechanism, locking the rudder in the full left position. This caused the airplane to roll sharply to the left and begin a rapid descent. His low airspeed and altitude afforded only a few precious seconds to try and rectify the situation.

Moments later, traveling 120 miles per hour, the plane crashed through the tops of the mesquite trees. A large branch broke off, leaving a sharpened point that punched right through the side of the cockpit like a sword. It passed half an inch above Dan's thigh and stopped just before it skewered him. The airplane hit the ground hard and cart wheeled several times, ripping the nose of the plane off and exposing

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Dan's feet. It then flipped end over end several times before crushing the glass canopy as it settled upside-down onto the hard clay soil.

Dan tried in vain to free himself from the wreckage. All he could do was hang upside-down in his harness as fuel gushed out and pooled around the cockpit. Things deteriorated quickly, and he felt sure a fire would soon erupt and burn him to death. To make matters worse, the radio in the airplane had been destroyed and no one was aware of the crash.

Completely out of options, Dan was forced to calm himself and think. He began to pray...and pray and pray and pray. As he prayed, he remembered that he had a cell phone in his pocket, a fact that gave him hope and a chance of getting out alive.

Having a phone was one thing, but getting it out of his pocket was quite another. His entire body weight had it compressed between his leg and the seatbelt. Dan violently battled his confines and, after a lengthy fight, was finally able to free it. Wedging it between the ground and his ear, he successfully called for help.

An hour and a half later, the rescue teams located the wreckage and pulled him from underneath. He was unscathed except for some soreness and an adrenalin crash that almost knocked him out.

Later, when he analyzed the events, he realized how much God's protective hand had been involved. He came up with five major instances where God intervened: The branch that pierced the cockpit stopped short before stabbing him, his feet did not get torn off or injured even though they were dangling free during the crash, the wires on his headset were sliced in half by glass from the broken canopy but his face and head were not touched, a fire never ignited, and he had a cell phone with signal. Some people credit Dan's well-being to luck, but he gives all of the credit to God.

In many ways, Dan's crash mirrors the paths of our lives. One moment we are cruising along without a care in the world, and the next moment we are crashing out-of-control wondering what is going on and how it will end. Sometimes the impetus for the crash is of our own doing, and other times, we are just unfortunate victims of circumstance.

Although we try our best to steer clear of these low points, they are an inescapable part of life's undulation. We must remember that just as we can't stay on the top of life forever, we will not stay permanently confined to the bottom either. One of the keys to life is enjoying the good times, making the best of the bad times, and seeing God acting through it all.

I'm sure that, during the crash, Dan didn't see God protecting him. In fact, it probably looked as if God wasn't present at all. In a matter of seconds, Dan was taken from the height of contentment to the point of hopelessness – the point where all he could do was give up or pray. He chose to pray, and God honored his decision with the simple memory of a cell phone. That memory triggered a domino effect of events that led to his being rescued. In retrospect, God's involvement can be seen in every part of the crash, and His name is proclaimed in the telling of the story.

Bad things happen sometimes, and we can't avoid them. Instead, we must grit our teeth and endure them. You can be certain, however, that God is deeply involved in whatever is taking place. He may not take the actions *we* think are best but, instead, does what *He* deems most important and truly needed. He works behind the scenes, doing things we may never know about until we get to heaven – things like protecting us from further detriment and lessening the current blows of adversity. Rest assured that with faith in Him, the circumstances will ultimately work out for our good and His glory – and giving Him glory is the meaning of life – even when it hurts and we don't understand why.

God is good. He is trustworthy. He is there in the light and the dark. Look back on events and see Him. He's there; it's just that sometimes you have to look very carefully. Over time, you may get to the point where you recognize His works in the midst of misery. At that point, peace and assurance replace panic and despair. It's worth the effort. You can do it!

Love a lot and laugh a lot. It's the best thanks you can give Him.





# CHANGE, CHANGE, CHANGE

I don't know about you, but I get so fed up with all of the yammering during the political season that I just want to explode. I promise you I won't add to the noise by making this a political rant favoring one side over another. Oh, I want to very badly, but I won't.

Have you ever noticed that one of the only slogans used in politics is, "Change!" Whoa boy, doesn't that just make your heart skip a beat. When I hear it, I sarcastically think to myself, "Wow, something new! That person is running on a platform of *change*. What a concept! They've got my vote!" Can't anyone come up with something new and different? Anyone?

Anything?

The political process, in my opinion, can be summed up very succinctly. Every election season wily politicians manage to convince people that their version of "change" is exactly what is needed to heal the country. Their plans seem almost magical. Yet, by the end of their term, their plans have met with failure and all of the candidates – including the incumbents – are running on a platform of change. What's up with that? It's like they are running against themselves while dodging responsibility by blaming other people and events.

I am definitely not beating up on our political system. It's the best in the world, period. I'm just frustrated with the monotonous cycle and endless chant for change. It's a prime example of "the more something changes, the more it stays the same." If there is one thing in politics that you can be sure won't change, it's the fact that things will keep changing. I mean, let's be honest. We will never come up with a plan the entire country agrees upon. It's just not going to happen – especially when you factor in pride, greed, selfishness, power, and corruption.

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There are some things, however, that never change. They are the really important elements of life: the need for love and acceptance, the fact that the truth will set you free, that it is always better to give than to receive, that the more love you give, the more love you will receive, that it is better to listen than talk, that money doesn't buy happiness, that we should put others first, that pleasing God should come before everything else, that God loves us just the way we are and more.

You know, the fact that God doesn't change is very encouraging. He never makes mistakes, is incorruptible and will never turn His back on us. He is our fortress, a solid foundation in an ever-changing world. He is someone we know will always be there for us, will relieve our stress and someone we can turn to in times of need. He loves us and always will. That is very reassuring, especially during the political season.

Don't let the world get you down. God is in charge – always has been and always will be. If that's true, and I believe it is, we really don't have to worry about anything because He's going to take care of it.

Love a lot and laugh a lot. It's the best thanks you can give Him.

# CEREBRAL PALSY AND FISHING – WHAT A COMBO!

**T**HE moment was finally upon us. She had been waiting a long time, and the suspense was driving her crazy. Larry and I lifted Patty's wheelchair into the boat, strapped it down, and secured her life vest. She was so excited I thought she would explode. Her smile was wider than the sunrise.

Patty has cerebral palsy, which affords her a severely limited range of movement. To make matters worse, she fell down a few years ago and permanently injured her back. The doctors cannot correct her back injury or even ease her discomfort. Her pain level is so high that they gave her a morphine pump to carry with her at all times. She uses it as little as possible, because she doesn't like the way it makes her feel. Despite all of this, Patty is full of life and has a fantastic attitude.

Patty had never been fishing or even on a boat until this day and she was bursting at the seams to get started. I hit the gas and worried that the quick start may scare her. Expecting the worst, I looked over and, to my surprise, she was beaming with pleasure. She literally couldn't contain herself. She grinned and laughed the entire time.

We tried several fishing spots, and the only fish we were able to find were tiny little perch. Most fishermen scoff at perch, but she thought they were the best fish in the bay. Every time she'd get a bite, she'd start the motorized reel and quickly bring it in. The pictures are priceless!

After several hours, she asked me if we could go. I thought she meant go home—she meant go fast. I hammered the throttle and soon we were going full speed. When I checked on her, I noticed tears coming from her eyes. Were they caused by the wind or were they tears of joy?

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I don't know. It doesn't matter. She liked going fast and we kept going fast until she said to stop. It was a long time.

When I think back on that day, I feel blessed, really blessed. She taught me so much. If I were severely handicapped and hooked up to a morphine pump, I would probably feel sorry for myself and complain constantly. Do you know what?! I have never seen Patty without a smile on her face. If you ask her how she does it, she will tell you that it is God. She gives Him credit for everything. Wow! She cannot speak very well, but she doesn't have to. Her life tells it all. I loved giving the gifts of boating and fishing to Patty. It warmed my heart to watch her enjoy them so much. I think God is the same way with us. He constantly gives us gifts and loves to watch us enjoy them. Patty sees the gifts of God everywhere and says "thank you" by thoroughly enjoying them. We can do that, too. Slow down, open your eyes and heart...and enjoy.

Love a lot and laugh a lot. It's the best thanks you can give Him.

# BEATING LANCE ARMSTRONG

**I**T was the toughest climb I'd ever attempted. To say it was straight up was an understatement, and 140 miles into the race...well, that was just cruel (darn race organizers). I was pushing my pedals with every ounce of energy I could muster. My thighs were burning and my lungs felt like they were going to explode. The summit was still lingering over a mile away when I decided to look back and see if the chasing pack of riders was in trouble or about to swallow me. To my utter amazement, they were strung out down the mountain. Even Lance Armstrong was grimacing in pain and losing ground. I was actually beating Lance Armstrong on a climb! I couldn't believe it. My most impossible dream was coming true. Then the unthinkable happened....I woke up. Even in the midst of slumber, life can be cruel. It was only a dream, but I'll relish the memory forever.

Cycling really has become a big part of my life, and over time I've noticed some similarities between cycling, life and God. "What does God have to do with riding a bike?" you ask. Well, first of all, He's really fast and has great equipment. At this moment, there are three teams trying to sign Him to a long term contract. (Just kidding - I'm so weird).

If people's lives were turned into a bike ride, it would probably end up becoming a race. Everyone would be measuring themselves against the people around them and pushing the hardest gear possible. They would be killing themselves in the process, but hey, if we are not worn to a frazzle, we are not going hard enough, right?! Most people would never even consider moving to a smaller gear to make the pedaling easier. If they did, they might lose ground, and we can't have that. Over time the lack of gear changes would become habit and some people might even forget how to change gears.

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We, as humans, tend to get stuck in one gear and try to make that gear work for all situations. But just like riding a bike, the results of this strategy are frustration, anger, fatigue, and, ultimately, lost ground.

The world constantly tells us, even pushes us, to be faster, to attain more, to be more efficient, more effective, blah, blah, blah... When computers were invented, it was actually said that everyone would be afforded more free time. The thinking was that the efficiency of computers would help us get our work done more quickly and the time left over could be spent with family and friends. Wrong! The time left over is crammed with more work and higher expectations of achievement.

While speed and efficiency have their places in life, so do rest, relaxation, and reflection. God designed us with multiple speeds or “gears,” to use the cycling analogy. There are times for fast and furious pedaling and times to get off the darn bike and rest. It seems, however, that we get so caught up in the crazy, hectic side of life that we never rest. When we don’t rest, we end up unhappy and inefficient.

Take some time and sit quietly. It will feel strange at first, and if you are like me, you will feel like you are wasting time, but you are not. In fact, you are making the best possible use of your time. Jesus himself valued rest and prayer over ceaseless activity.

When you rest and pray regularly, an interesting thing happens: energy levels are rejuvenated, efficiency increases, and everything just seems to fall into place. Well, maybe not everything, but it sure is a lot better than if prayer and rest are left out. Scientific studies have shown that stress levels in the brain come way down when a person prays.

Of course they do. Praying is the time when we are in contact with God, and being in contact with God is the purpose for which we are made. Jesus is the Prince of Peace, which is the opposite of stress, and when you spend enough time with Him, some of that peace just rubs off on you.

## SHOOTING COWS

Don't get stuck in one gear your whole life. Learn to use the other gears, especially rest and prayer. When you do, you'll be ready to handle the pressures of life when they come.

Love a lot and laugh a lot. It's the best thanks you can give Him.





## AND THEN...

**W**HEN teenagers go to a Young Life summer camp, they are full of excitement and wonder. They step off the bus and are blown away by the facilities and work crew that is cheering, screaming and giving them high-fives as they exit. Young Life camps are five-star resorts for teens. The theory behind the lush accommodations is this: if kids have everything they need and want, they will not be distracted by a desire for anything else and, therefore, will be able to pay attention to the talks and the Gospel.

All I can say is that it works. I have been to camp with kids many times and have had the privilege of seeing lives transformed right before my eyes.

One of the most basic and profound things I witnessed happened one evening during cabin time. Cabin time is when all of the teens in a cabin get together with their leaders and talk about life, God, and whatever else is on their minds. During that particular cabin time, the kids were joking about what they were going to be when they grow up. My co-counselor seized the moment and steered the conversation from things of materialism to things of eternity. Their conversation follows.

“What are you going to do when you graduate?” the counselor asked.

“Go to college,” the teen answered.

“And then what?” the counselor pursued.

“Find a girlfriend, maybe someone I’ll marry,” the kid quipped.  
(Much laughter and banter from the other kids.)

“Then what?” the counselor repeated.

“I don’t know. I guess get a degree in something,” the kid answered.

“Then what?” asked the counselor.

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“Graduate! And then I’ll be through with school forever. Yes!” the kid replied. More banter.

“Then what?”

“Get a job where I’ll make a million bucks.” (More banter)

“Awesome! Then what?”

“I don’t know. I guess have kids.”

“Then what?”

“Dude! I don’t know. Raise the kids I guess,” said the kid, getting a little perturbed.

“Then what?”

“Become an old man.”

“Then what?”

“Die!” replied the kid, exasperated and ready to end the conversation.

“Then what?”

Kid.....silence and deep thought.

If I could take you through the same cycle, you would end up in the same place as that kid. So I ask you, “Then what?” Take time and really contemplate it.

Some people will say they don’t believe anything will happen after they die. They believe that consciousness ends and their bodies will fade away in a box beneath the ground. Some people will say they have not ever thought about it. Some will say they don’t know. Some will say they are going to hell. (I’ve actually had people tell me that before.) Some will say they will go to heaven if they have done more good things than bad things during their lives. Those same people think they will go to hell if they have done more bad things than good things during their lives. And some will say with certainty that they are going to heaven.

What do you say? Not in general. Not about someone else, but about you. What do *you* say?

There is a way you can answer with certainty that you will go to heaven: ask Jesus to come into your life, forgive your sins and let Him lead your life from that point forward. It’s that easy. If you do that earnestly, He will jump at the opportunity to write your name in the Book of Life.

## SHOOTING COWS

Life after accepting Christ will not always be easy, but it will have deep meaning and be full of hope. It won't matter what the world may throw your way, because you and God together will make an unbeatable team. He will see you through everything. Trust Him. You will be glad you did.

Love a lot and laugh a lot. It's the best thanks you can give Him.



# WHAT KIND OF CITY

**I**MAGINE a shining city, standing alone on a hill in the middle of nowhere. At its gated entrance stands a large, tough-looking guard. It is his job to regulate the comings and goings of the community's inhabitants and visitors. This is where our story begins.

A man, who is nearing the completion of a long journey, approaches the city gates and the guard stops him. They have a short conversation, and then the traveler asks the guard, "What kind of city is this?" The guard replies with a question, "What kind of city did you come from?" The man says, "It was terrible. That's why I left. Everyone there was out to get you. Most of them were liars and cheats. There were crimes being committed all of the time. It was a bad place." The guard looked sad and said, "That's what kind of city this is" and let him enter.

A short time passed and another man approached the gates. He struck up a conversation with the guard and then asked, "What kind of city is this?" The guard replied with the same question, "What kind of city did you come from?" The man described a city that contained a mixture of both good and bad elements. It was an average, "middle-of-the-road" city. After he was finished, the guard stated, "That's what kind of city this is" and let him enter.

A little while later, a third man approached the guard and the same question surfaced. The guard replied, "What kind of city did you come from?" The man praised his hometown at length. He said the people were great, the city was beautiful, and everything was wonderful. In fact, he found it very hard to leave. The guard smiled and said, "That's what kind of city this is" and let him enter.

The moral to this story is: Wherever you are and whatever your situation, you will find what you are looking for. If you anticipate and

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focus on the negative things in life, you will find them. In fact, that is the easiest and laziest thing a person can do. Conversely, if you seek the good and beautiful things in life, you will find those also – only more of them.

Today is the first day of the rest of our lives, and we are, in a sense, entering through the guarded gate of the city. The city contains all of the remaining days of our existence. There may be one, there may be many thousands—no one knows.

One thing we do know is that our time spent there will become our history and memories. If we make the best of each day and earnestly seek to do God's will, then later in life, we will be able to look back on wonderful memories and an outstanding legacy for our children. Today is tomorrow's memory; don't waste it. You'll never get a chance to live it again. Make the most of every minute by looking for the beauty in life and being of service to others. Over time, it will become an outstanding habit.

The Bible says there is no greater love than to lay one's life down for someone else.<sup>6</sup> That doesn't just mean jumping in front of a bullet to save another person's life. It means the daily sacrificing of our own wants and desires in order to help other people. It means putting others first on a daily basis, helping them without their having to ask, and going out of our way to say things that offer encouragement and peace.

We can accept our days as gifts from God and make the most of them, or we can take them for granted and throw them away. It is our choice.

Life can be wonderful if you choose to make it so. It may not always be easy, but it is worth the effort!

Love a lot and laugh a lot. It's the best thanks you can give Him.

## UP & DOWN, UGH!

**H**AVE you ever thought how amazing it is that so many people can function together as a society? When you take into account the complexities of life, it is amazing that we can function at all. Take, for example, the difference between up and down. Yes, you read it right. You may think that the definitions of up and down are simple, clear, and universally agreed upon, but I say, “Nay nay!” You may think I’m crazy, but I’ll prove it.

Take something as simple as the air conditioner. When it comes to the good ole A/C, people seem to vehemently disagree on the meanings of up and down. To one group of people *turn it up* means they want it warmer and *turn it down* means they want it cooler. To another group of people, the terms mean the exact opposite. (Pure insanity!...and one of my pet peeves).

It’s amazing how adamantly people will stick to their guns on this issue. They will bring up a litany of so-called facts to back up their position and prove themselves right. Oh, the arguments that ensue from this little doozie.

Now, let’s complicate things further. (Wait, you say. I didn’t believe you at first, but now I do. It can’t get worse, can it?) Trust me.

Let’s consider the automobile air conditioner. In the car we not only have the up and down confusion described above, but we also have a third bit of confusion to deal with – air velocity! Now when someone says to *turn it up*, it may mean colder, hotter, or faster! (How do we survive?)

If something as simple as *up* and *down* can become so complicated, what about the complexities of knowing God? He is someone we can’t fully understand, yet most of the world does their best to do just that.

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In and of itself, trying to understand God is a good thing, because we are at least spending time on the subject of God. When people gather together and discuss God, however, the exchange usually devolves into a plethora of theological ideas and concepts. This seems to be the natural course of spiritual conversations but, unfortunately, most of the time the main point is missed.

To me, the foundation for understanding God is knowing that He loves me. He loves you, too. He has proven it throughout history and continues to prove it daily through a myriad of blessings both big and small. Maybe one of the most basic ways God proves His love for us is the fact that we function as a society, despite life's complications.

If you boil it all down, I think what we are supposed to do is let God love us. I don't mean continue our insane speed of life and frequently force the thought, "God loves me." That won't do anything but add to our "to do" list and increase our frenzied schedule. We need to slow down, take the time to pray, and be still. He uses the blank canvas that prayer and silence offer to love us. Try them—you'll see. Yes, praying and becoming still may seem awkward at first, but so did walking or driving. Keep at it; it will soon be second nature.

When we let Him love us, a funny thing happens. We start loving Him back. It's not something that has to be forced, it just naturally happens. Before we know it, we will love others and even ourselves (I think that is the hardest thing for many people to do). When that happens, watch out, because your world will begin to change.

Oh, by the way, there is a simple way to clear up the confusion that surrounds the A/C – just say *warmer* or *colder* instead of up and down. Believe it or not, people really do understand and agree with those two terms.

God loves you. He created you and even created humor too. So...  
Love a lot and laugh a lot. It's the best thanks you can give Him.



# RIDING WITH THE BLUE ANGELS

**I**F you've ever had the feeling of a long-lost dream coming true, then you know how I felt as I stepped out of the car and approached the Blue Angels F-18 Super Hornet. The glossy blue and yellow paint scheme shined in the sun and made it stand out on the tarmac like a jewel in the desert. Daniel, the Crew Chief, escorted me to the airplane, and with the snap and precision of military excellence, lowered the ladder and motioned for me to climb aboard. I stopped short of mounting the ladder and asked him to give me a few seconds. This had been a lifelong aspiration of mine and I wanted to absorb the moment. I gazed at the magnificent machine and noted every feature from the nose to the tail. Hopes and desires from the past flooded my mind. It was surreal. I couldn't believe I was actually going to fly with the Blue Angels. Barely able to constrain my excitement, I breathed deeply, thanked God for giving me the privilege, and ascended the ladder.

It was the twelve-point harness that first hinted to the intensity of the forces I would soon endure. It not only secured my shoulders and torso, but my thighs, knees, and ankles as well. I didn't understand why I had to have straps down to my ankles, until later when those straps were the only things keeping my legs from smashing into the control panel during inverted flight, high-G maneuvers, and upon ejection, if necessary. I'm glad I didn't think of that beforehand.

Once I was *bolted down*, Daniel showed me certain points of interest in the cockpit. Of special note were the grey, black and yellow areas. He said, "Grey is ok. You can touch it. But black and yellow will kill a fellow. Don't touch those things! If you do, you will leave the plane or things

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will start leaving the plane.” I made sure to implicitly comply with his orders except when the pilot later told me to arm my seat.

The last pre-flight lesson I received was how to do a proper “Hick Maneuver.” The Hick Maneuver is an exercise performed during high-G turns which helps maintain consciousness by keeping the blood in one’s head. It consists of tightly squeezing every muscle in the legs and buttocks, followed by flexing all of the muscles from the diaphragm down to the groin while saying “hick.” This must be done as hard as possible and maintained throughout the stunt while continuing to breathe. Every three to five seconds, very rapidly, the person doing the Hick Maneuver must exhale, inhale and re-tighten all of his muscles again while grunting the word “hick.” Over time it becomes very tiring, and if it is not done hard enough, vision becomes tunneled and is soon followed by unconsciousness.

The last of my preparations was completed, and while the pilot, Lt. David Tickle, prepared to fly, I took a moment to reflect. I have wanted to be a jet pilot since I was a kid, but unfortunately, I was born with glaucoma and only have sight in one eye. That is something the military will not overlook, and therefore, my chances of becoming a fighter pilot or even flying in a fighter jet were zero. God, however, being good and benevolent, knew how badly I wanted it and graced me with a once-in-a-lifetime chance to fly with the Blues. I was determined to make the most of it and promised myself that no matter how intense it was or how sick I felt, I would give it 110%.

When the canopy finally closed, we taxied toward the runway and Lt. Tickle told me to arm my seat. I toggled the black and yellow lever which armed the ejection rockets located directly beneath my backside. *That’s an odd reality to experience.*

Once we were given clearance from the tower, he hit the after-burners, and thirty six thousand pounds of thrust sent us barreling down the runway. He lifted the plane a few feet off the ground, held it level, and asked me if I was ready to fly. I replied with an emphatic, “Yes sir!” He said, “Squeeze those legs, ready, hit it!” When he said, “Hit it,” I began doing the “Hick Maneuver” for all I was worth. Lt. Tickle yanked

back on the stick and we instantly rotated to near vertical, pulling away from the earth like a rocket. Never in my life have I experienced force pushing me back into my seat like that. I thought my brains were going to blow out of the back of my head. In a matter of seconds, we were at five thousand feet, heading out over the Gulf of Mexico to do aerobatics. What a blast!

On the way out, I asked Lt. Tickle if we could go supersonic. He replied in the affirmative and I couldn't wait. We started off by doing several of the maneuvers the Blues do in their shows and then hit full afterburner until we broke the sound barrier. Strangely enough, the occupants of the airplane cannot hear the sonic boom, but it is still a rush to be going roughly 800 miles per hour. Talk about getting the adrenalin flowing.

After going supersonic, he said he'd give me my first taste of real G's. I thought we had experienced significant G's on takeoff! Wrong again. (A "G," short for G-force, is a measurement of the gravitational force acting on the body. One G is what is experienced every day under normal conditions. Two G's is twice that of normal and may be experienced while landing quickly in a commercial airliner. The higher the number of G's, the more weight or force a person feels. For example, if a person weighs 150 lbs at one G, at two G's there would be 300 lbs of force acting upon him; at three G's there would be 450 lbs of force acting upon him, and at four G's the force would be 600 lbs. The force acting on the body increases proportionally with the increase in the G-force.)

Lt. Tickle voiced the pre-G cadence and I initiated the Hick Maneuver. He rolled the plane ninety degrees to the side, pulled back on the stick, and sustained five G's (900 lbs of force) for what seemed like an eternity. My vision closed in and I fought to keep from passing out. Suddenly, he rolled out of it and I had a newfound respect for G's, fighter pilots and how hard the Hick Maneuver must be done.

We continued to do all kinds of stunts including loops, rolls, bombing hops and 7.4 G turns (1,332 lbs of force) through which I was able to remain conscious. I did finally succumb, however, to motion

sickness several times and, on one hard turn, passed out and began to dream that I was at home, taking a nap. When Lt. Tickle noticed that I was a goner, he rolled the plane upside down which allowed the blood to flow back into my head and wake me up. Let me tell you how disconcerting it is to wake up from a pleasant dream, hanging upside-down in a harness while staring at the Gulf of Mexico, completely disoriented and not knowing where you are.

After we landed, I was so unsettled that I had to sit in the briefing room for an hour and drink water until I felt stable enough to drive. It was an incredible adventure – the height of ecstasy and depths misery at the same time.

The whole experience was filmed via a dashboard camera, and the highlight reel is on YouTube - [www.youtube.com/user/wgrassy98](http://www.youtube.com/user/wgrassy98). If you watch the video, you'll notice that I couldn't pass up the chance to take jabs at my brother and friends. No self-respecting male would. Those sections are at the beginning and 7:03 into it. Shortly thereafter is the point at which I lose consciousness. Feel free to laugh – everyone else does!

It is a mystery to me how pilots endure the forces that I experienced and are still able to maintain situational awareness. It is hard enough to keep oriented as to where up and down are, but keeping track of enemies, allies, missiles, airspeed, altitude and more is beyond my comprehension. As much as I feel like I am betraying my childhood by stating this, I don't think I'm cut out to be a fighter pilot. Those guys are good, much better than me. It is incredible what they can do.

If you have never seen an air show featuring the Blue Angels, do whatever it takes to see them. They are some of the best pilots in the world and they prove it at every performance. Whether it's two planes passing head on, mere feet from each other or multiple planes doing stunts while only eighteen inches apart, they are amazing.

Oddly enough, I had a really hard time coming up with a relation between this experience and God. I could see Him involved in every aspect of it, but nothing jumped out and grabbed me until I thought

about the answer I was giving to the question everyone has been asking me: “How’d you get to do that?” The answer is, I asked!

That’s what started the ball rolling: I simply asked a question. Rear Admiral Sizemore II, whom I did not know at the time, was speaking with another gentleman about the Blue Angels. Throwing manners to the wind, I interjected and asked how someone might go about getting a ride with them. He politely took the time to explain and had the paperwork sent to me. That is how it all started.

Sometimes God waits for us to ask, too. He has a storehouse of gifts and blessings He is ready to give us, but some may only be given as an answer to prayer. He is not an arrogant God wanting us to beg and grovel; it’s just that asking is a statement of faith. It shows that we see Him as the provider and ourselves as His dependents.

The Bible says in James 4:2 “You do not have because you do not ask.” He wants us to ask Him for things. Some people think it makes God angry if we ask for things, but it doesn’t. He tells us to. Granted, our prayers should contain more than just a list of needs; they should also be filled with praise, repentance, and thanksgiving, but we definitely should request things from Him.

When praying requests to God, open up and let your heart be known. Tell Him everything. Don’t be afraid, just let loose. You can’t shock Him, because He already knows everything. Opening up to Him establishes the lines of communication, and He will honor your vulnerability with blessings and love.

As you continue to pray, your relationship with God will grow stronger, and in time you may find yourself praying more for others and less for yourself. He has a way of making your heart become selfless and centered on the well-being of others. As your relationship with God develops, you may get to the point of mainly praying for His will to be done - not with resignation, but with joyful trust, knowing deeply that if His will is done, everything will work out for the best. He knows what He’s doing and He’s quite good at it. Trust Him, you’ll see.

Whether it’s something big, small or as wild as a ride with the Blue Angels, ask Him. He’s looking forward to hearing from you, and

### 3 MINUTES TO GOD

sometimes, if you are lucky, He'll answer you with a great big surprise that you may think is impossible.

Love a lot and laugh a lot. It's the best thanks you can give Him.

# MY GRANDFATHER'S HAND

**I**T is as clear today as it was so many years ago. My grandfather's hand, weak and unmoving, was wrapped in mine. The whole family was gathered around the recliner in which he rested. We all knew what was coming, and we dreaded it. We dreaded it, but at the same time prayed for an end to his cancerous misery.

His breathing slowed peacefully, and when he breathed his last, I had the privilege of holding his hand. The realization of his loss sank in, and all of the heads in the room hung low as tears flowed.

At that moment it occurred to me that all of the near-death experiences I have ever heard about began with the soul of the deceased rising above the situation and observing what was going on below. In case Pa Pa's soul was watching from above, I raised my face to the ceiling, winked my eye, smiled the best I could and nodded my head to say "It's OK. Go. I love you."

I was saying goodbye to a huge part of my life: to the man who taught me so much about hunting, fishing, tenacity, business and will power. It hurt. Still does.

Later, when my Dad was going through my grandfather's business and personal effects, he began to find notes. He found them in the checkbook, in files, in the car, everywhere – even in his Bible. They all said just one thing, "I love you."

Unlike many of us, Pa Pa had the privilege of knowing his time was near. He was able to gather his thoughts and sort out what he deemed to be the most important thing in life. Once he processed it, he decided to leave notes that he knew wouldn't be found until after his death. Notice I said "notes" and not letters. I guess at that point in his life, he had already said everything he was going to say, so writing long letters

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would only be repetitious. Even so, he still had one thing he wanted us to know, especially my Dad. That one thing was “I love you.” It is interesting that Pa Pa’s notes said, “I love you,” in the present tense, not “I *loved* you,” which is a strong statement that says two things. First, when life comes down to the wire and there is no time left, the most important thing in life is love. Second, when our final breath draws near, people come to the realization that life really does continue in the spiritual world. Since it does, it is possible to say “I love you” even after passing away, because they still do and will forever.

If you think about it, Pa Pa did something similar to what Jesus did – he kept the communication going with us after he died. Instead of notes, though, Jesus left us a letter, a long letter commonly known as the Bible. When you boil it all down, the Bible is really two things, a road map for life and one long love letter from God to man.

The Bible is not the only way God converses with us, though, He also communicates to us through the Holy Spirit and everyday things we take for granted – the uplifting words of another person, the excitement we sometimes feel for no reason, a cool wind on a hot day, sunrises, sunsets, fellowship and teachings at church, smiles – basically, everything that is good, makes us feel good, or leads us to live better lives. Those are his “notes” to us.

Think about it. He leaves us “notes” so often that many times we fail to recognize them. Pretty cool, huh?! To think that God is saying, “I love you” so frequently we may actually take it for granted is amazing. He could be a mean, angry, overbearing God who gets a thrill out of seeing us scurry and cower. He could make us live in a black and white, desolate, monotone world, but He doesn’t. Why? Because He loves us and enjoys watching us revel in the world He gave us.

Do you know what I think He likes best? To hear us laugh. Not so much muted polite laughter or even the medium everyday laughter, but big, deep belly laughter – the kind where you are gasping for air and grabbing your stomach with your eyes watering. You know as well as I, that kind of laughter is contagious and when it happens, people nearby



start laughing, too. You know what? I think God laughs as well. We are created in His image, and I think we get humor and laughter from Him.

It's pretty cool to think that the next time you are laughing uncontrollably, God himself may be doubled up on the floor in heaven, laughing so hard He has tears coming out of his eyes and is saying "Stop, stop, I can't take it anymore."

Just like my Grandfather left notes saying, "I love you," God tells us in many different ways every day that He loves us. Spend some time alone with Him. Tell Him you love Him. That is something He relishes.

Love a lot and laugh a lot. It's the best thanks you can give Him.



# THE ROAD OF LIFE

**T**HE following is an excerpt from the book *Holy Sweat*, an incredibly motivating book that I highly recommend. This poem has had a great impact on my life and my thinking. Over the years, I have found myself in every part of it. Maybe you will, too. Enjoy!

## The Road of Life

At first I saw God as my observer, my judge, keeping track of the things I did wrong, so as to know whether I merited heaven or hell when I die.

He was out there sort of like a president. I recognized His picture when I saw it, but I really didn't know Him.

But later on, when I met Christ, it seemed as though life was rather like a bike ride, but it was a tandem bike, and I noticed that Christ was in the back helping me pedal.

I don't know just when it was that He suggested we change places, but life has not been the same since.

When I had control, I knew the way. It was rather boring, but predictable...It was the shortest distance between two points.

But when He took the lead, He knew *delightful long cuts, up mountains, and through rocky places at breakneck speeds, it was all I could do to hang on! Even though it looked like madness, He said, "Pedal!"*

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I worried and was anxious and asked, “Where are you taking me?” He laughed and didn’t answer, and *I started to learn to trust.*

*I forgot my boring life and entered into the adventure.* And when I’d say, “I’m scared.” He’d lean back and touch my hand.

He took me to people with gifts that I needed, gifts of healing, acceptance, and joy. They gave me gifts to take on my journey, my Lord’s and mine.

And we were off again. He said, “Give the gifts away; they’re extra baggage, too much weight.” So I did, to the people we met, and I found that in giving I received, and still our burden was light.

I did not trust Him, at first, in control of my life. I thought He’d wreck it; but He knows bike secrets, knows how to make it bend to take sharp corners, knows how to jump to clear high rocks, knows how to fly to shorten scary passages.

And *I am learning to shut up and pedal* in the strangest places, and I’m beginning to enjoy the view and the cool breeze on my face with my delightful constant companion, Jesus Christ.

And when I’m sure I just can’t do anymore, He just smiles and says....”Pedal.”

Author Unknown

Love a lot and laugh a lot. It’s the best thanks you can give Him.

## LIKE A TEENAGED SCHOOLGIRL

**M**Y wife recently gave me one of the best gifts I could have ever received. She arranged for me to work as a course marshal at the Tour of California, which is one of the biggest cycling races in the United States. It is such a big deal that many of the teams that race in the Tour de France travel from Europe to take part.

You have to understand that what football is to most guys, cycling is to me. I don't really ride much, but I absolutely have a passion for following the sport. Once I start talking, get comfortable, because I will not stop. I just turn into a babbling encyclopedia of useless cycling trivia.

One of the best things that has occurred over the years is that my wife, Kim, has become as big a fan of cycling as me. We now share the passion. While most people's children lose TV rights during playoffs and the Super Bowl, our poor kids, loose TV rights for 23 days every July during the Tour de France. Don't call social services. They will live, I promise.

The reason I told you all of this is to impress upon you what this gift means to me. To actually attend and work a race of this caliber is unreal. It's the equivalent to being on the sidelines during the Super Bowl. I had a chance to meet my heroes, and boy, did I make it count.

I was running around like a teenaged school girl chasing after the Beatles. My brother was with me and did his best to keep up. He was my camera and autograph book caddie. (He almost got fired once). I met everyone: the reigning tour champion, TV commentators and even

### 3 MINUTES TO GOD

a past winner of the Tour de France. Whenever I saw a famous person, I shamelessly ran up and asked for an autograph, even when it was the wrong person, but that is another story. I even had the chance to put my wife on the phone with her favorite TV commentator and the past Tour de France champion. *She* was screaming like a schoolgirl as she spoke to them. If “brownie points” exist, and that is debatable, I earned some for that!

Later, I was thinking about how filled with excitement I was and how I had acted. A long stream of thoughts ensued, and I ended up questioning how it might be when a person gets to heaven.

My imagination tells me that getting to heaven will begin with our waiting in a long line amidst white, puffy clouds. When you get to the front of the line, St. Peter finds your name in the book of life and lets you inside. Then, I don’t know what happens next. I guess I always thought that God would be way out there somewhere, and we would just kind of join in with the crowd and worship Him.

That may be the best thing we ever experience, but to me, right now, it seems boring. I know my brain can’t even comprehend the joy and peace we will experience, but for my pea-sized brain, at this point in time, it seems boring.

The thoughts I had about the race and how it relates to heaven changed my views a little. What if heaven is kind of like the bike race, but instead of me seeing Moses or Paul and excitedly running up to them, it is God running up to me (or you)?

Imagine with me for a moment. We get to heaven and there is a huge crowd. We are all feeling somewhat lost and trying to figure out what to do. Suddenly, Jesus comes running out of the crowd toward us, and He is giddy with excitement. A huge smile adorns His face as He calls out our names and hugs us like long-lost brothers. He welcomes us to heaven, introduces us to everyone and makes us feel like everything is now complete because of our arrival. Wouldn’t that be cool?!

Some may say, “Jesus wouldn’t do that. He is God and we are there to worship Him.” I would have to respond by saying, “You’re right, He is God, but are you so sure He wouldn’t stoop down to that level? If I

## SHOOTING COWS

recall history correctly, He shocked the socks off everyone once before by stooping to an even lower level – for our sakes.” I may be wrong about my idea of heaven, but there is a part of me hopes I’m not.

Love a lot and laugh a lot. It’s the best thanks you can give Him.





EVERYTHING I KNOW ABOUT  
WOMEN

The preceding “story” has drawn great amounts of laughter and criticism. The critics said it doesn’t fit the book or have anything to do with God. The others laughed. It is included here simply for a break in the action and a quick, albeit cheap, laugh.

It is my firm belief that God created humor, and when we laugh, especially at ourselves, we grow closer to God. I don’t fit “the mould” that so many think I should fit into, so I laugh at myself – a lot. I think it is understandable that I would write a “story” that doesn’t fit either. This “story” is meant to be funny. That’s all. No meaning, no depth, just a little humor.

(If you don’t like it, I’m sorry. Please keep reading. If you do like it, thank you for laughing along with me. Please keep reading.)

Love a lot and laugh a lot. It’s the best thanks you can give Him.

## 4<sup>TH</sup> OF JULY

**A**H, the Fourth of July weekend. Great, isn't it?! A few years ago I spent it with my family, several friends, two dogs, and three children ages seven, three and two. It was wonderful and everything went smoothly. Even feeding time went well, for the most part. One of the kids wouldn't eat because...well, the reasoning of a three-year-old isn't worth writing about. Let's just say he wouldn't eat. The two-year-old, on the other hand, ate everything in sight, including the cupcakes that were meant for a sick, elderly couple. I never imagined that a three-foot kid could reach to such high, lofty places. I was wrong – several cupcakes worth of wrong.

The evening sped by, and as I was preparing the kids for the trip home, it happened. I'm not even sure how it happened, but it happened. The adults gathered in the kitchen and started to hurl opinions and insults at each other like Jackie Chan throws punches. What were the subjects of this verbal combat? What else, politics AND religion.

I, personally, am willing to talk to anyone about politics and religion as long as a couple of ground rules are obeyed. First, no arguments are allowed. Second, each person must listen to the other without interrupting (boy, is that a toughie). These rules seem to keep everything manageable and the discussion flowing smoothly.

This "conversation," however, was launched into without the benefit of rules or decorum. So, being the verbally combat-hardened, wordsmith that I am, I avoided confrontation and went into the other room with the kids.

Knowing it might last a long time, I looked for some form of group entertainment. Nothing was available, my mind went blank, and the situation quickly spiraled out of control. The kids were running wild

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and the noise level was nearing that of a jet engine. Desperation set in and I grabbed the only thing I could find, a fingernail file. (Woo hoo... we're having fun now!) It wasn't much, but it was a distraction, and it got them to quit banging on the very loud and out-of-tune piano. They all lined up single "file" and had their nails done. I'm not a pro, mind you, but I will say there was an argument or two over who was next. After that fun was over, I went into the kitchen to try and calm things down. That lasted about as long as it takes a rider to fall off of a bull and...it was back to the kids for Wade.

The game this time was "ride the horsy," and I'll let you guess who had the privilege of being the horsy. What a fun game...for them. After a few million laps, my arms were tired and I went back to the kitchen to try and put an end to the argument. Four seconds later I was back with the kids. What a statesman I am.

Finally, I got a stroke of genius. I packed up our things, corralled the children, and left by way of the kitchen. On the way through, I told the kids to tell everyone goodbye. Would you believe it actually worked? Yep, worked like a charm. And to top it off, everyone left as friends.

I had a thought while I was trapped in between the argument about God, and the blaring, out-of-tune piano (that's all I had time for). I imagined that, at times, this must be what people sound like to God. Everyone is throwing out their opinions, thoughts (He knows our thoughts), ideas, requests, prayers etc...all at the same time. Coupled with that, there are a plethora of sounds and other things going on simultaneously. It must be a like giant funnel of chaos aimed right at Him. It ought to drive Him crazy! But does it?

That kind of chaos drives me insane, and I have a very hard time dealing with it. In fact, I dealt with this situation the way I deal with most chaos: I bailed out. How does God react to it, though? I think He spreads His arms out wide enough to embrace all of us, in the same way He did when nailed to the cross, and says, "I love you this much!"

Some people may want to argue the previous point with me, and that is ok. People argue about God and their beliefs frequently. They've been doing it for thousands of years and will do so until the end of

time. It's a given. It reminds me of something I heard a pastor say about the different beliefs among mainline Christian churches. He said, "I think when Christians get to heaven and the end of the world has come, God is going to look at all of us and say, 'Some of you got it wrong and some of you *really* got it wrong. But I've talked to my Son Jesus and He said it's OK, so come on in.'"

While I don't think God prefers arguing, I think He is OK with it because at least we are talking about Him. He loves to be the center of our conversations and lives. When we remove ourselves from that central position and let Him fill it, everything seems to fall into place. Try it; I think you'll like what you experience.

Love a lot and laugh a lot. It's the best thanks you can give Him.



# GOD EVEN VISITS MCDONALD'S

**M**IKE had been a manager at McDonald's long enough to know what to look for in a good employee. Dependability, honesty and competency are the attributes he sought, and Tameka possessed all three. She was a great employee and, over time, they became good friends.

One day as Tameka finished her shift, Mike counted the money in her register. It was ten dollars short. He knew the mistake was probably his because Tameka's drawer was never off, not even by one cent. He recounted the drawer and it still came up ten dollars short. At this point he became very concerned because the company's policy was to terminate any employee whose register was off by more than five dollars. Hoping for the best, Mike meticulously counted the drawer a third time – still ten dollars short.

He knew she hadn't stolen it but couldn't find any evidence to prove otherwise. Without evidence to prove her innocence, he would have to terminate her. Mike pondered his options for quite some time and finally decided that Tameka must be terminated.

He summoned his courage and started the long journey through the kitchen to the front of the store where Tameka was stationed. His heart was heavy and he was very nervous.

Halfway through the kitchen, he was interrupted by another employee who told him that a lady from the drive-thru needed to speak with him right away. He knew that was code for "chew him out" for an order that was put together incorrectly, and that was the last thing he needed at the moment.

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Mike altered course, braced himself for a tongue lashing, and greeted the lady with the warmest greeting he could muster. She said, “I came through the drive-thru earlier today and the lady gave me ten dollars too much change! I had to get across town for a meeting so I couldn’t give it back when I discovered it. I finally got the time to come back and I don’t want the girl to get into trouble, so here it is.” She handed him the money.

Relief washed over Mike and a big smile spread across his face. He thanked the lady profusely and told her that she had just saved Tameka’s job.

Most people would have kept the money, and to tell you the truth, it would have crossed my mind, too. The lady in this story, however, was better than that. She did not think about personal gain or the extra effort it took to bring the money back. She wanted to do what was right, and in doing so, saved an honest girl her job and a lot of heartache. In addition, she was able to see God work and even be used by Him to help others.

We frequently come across situations where it is easier to do wrong than right, especially when no one will find out. It is in those times that we need to consider two things. First, the situation may be a test put there by God as a way of revealing your true character, and, second, a person of good character does what is right even when nobody is looking.

If we take the time and effort to do the right thing, God may use our actions to do something wonderful. When we handle these situations correctly, we become part of a process that results in God being honored. What a privilege! Doing the right thing also gives us a chance to earn a little bit of self respect, and that alone is worth it.

God can use everything that happens, even the little things, to have an impact on your life and your relationship with Him. Keep your eyes open, and when you are given the chance, go the extra mile – especially when it is the right thing to do. You never know, you just may get a chance to see God do His stuff.

Love a lot and laugh a lot. It’s the best thanks you can give Him.



## STACKERS & FILERS

**W**ITH the echoes of a 12-step meeting – “Hi, I’m Wade. I’m a stacker...and a maintainer.” Your response, “Hi, Wade.”

During the course of my life, I have found that there are, basically, two kinds of people in this world. There are stackers and there are filers. “*Wait,*” you say. “*What about the maintainer?*” Be patient.

A stacker is a person who has little stacks of stuff involved in almost every aspect of their life. To see if you qualify as a stacker, check three critical areas. First, inspect your desk at work. It’s a dead giveaway. Second, check around your home: the breakfast room table, coffee table, nightstand, the floor, and so on. Third, and this may be the best way to see if you qualify as a stacker, observe your car. Is the passenger seat full of stuff? If not, what about the back seat or dashboard? If there are stacks in one or more of these places, there is a high probability that you are a stacker.

Stackers are fairly easygoing people, but our stacks are very important to us. Don’t touch our stacks...or our stuff! We know exactly what is in each stack, and they aren’t hurting you anyway, so don’t touch them.

If you have an unbridled passion to clean up our stacks, you are a filer. You file everything neatly, and you are ridiculously organized. You admire the motto: *there’s a place for everything and everything has a place.* We stackers drive you filers nuts. Hee, hee!

The next topic, makers versus maintainers, may not be as obvious, but it is probably more rampant. You see, filers are usually bed makers while stackers are usually bed maintainers (we seldom make the bed – we’d rather *maintain* its present condition). Maintainers like the fact that the sheets are already comfy and there is a little cocoon into which we

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can crawl and continue the previous night's sleep. To a *maker* that is simply unacceptable. They like the look of a neatly-made bed and the feel of fresh, tight sheets. (Oh, please!)

The long and short of it is that *maintainers* are content to let *makers* do whatever they wish, but *makers* cannot and will not let *maintainers* live in peace.

Now, the one personality trait I have yet to cover is the worst and, by far, the most insidious. It is the *stacker in denial!* Regular stackers accept themselves for who they are, stackers. A stacker in denial, however, wants to be a filer so badly that they actually believe they are filers. Never mind all of the little stacks laying around. They are just “temporary,” even though they never seem to go away and tend to grow over time. Stackers in denial are filled with anxiety about their situation and long for peace – the peace of being a natural filer. They will only find that peace, however, when they accept themselves for who they are, a stacker. Such is life.

NEVER, NEVER, NEVER, tell a stacker in denial that they are a stacker and not a filer. There will be a fight as sure as the sun will come up tomorrow. Oh, and by the way, filers are never wrong...or so they think.

Believe it or not, stackers in denial can teach us a great lesson: trying to be someone other than who God wants us to be will lead to anxiety, anger, stress, fear, and even depression. Many of us are guilty of living a charade, even to the point of self deception. We do it for a variety of reasons, some of which include: gaining acceptance to social circles, appearing more competent at work, and hiding our faults. We think we have to be *good enough* or we won't be successful in life.

Success, however, is a relative term, and we need to be careful how we define it. Over time, Satan has redefined it to mean becoming rich and famous. Those things, however, frequently lead to anxiety, stress, loneliness, and addictions, not the peace and fulfillment we truly crave. Riches and fame are not bad in themselves, but they do become a massive problem when they are seen as the keys to peace and fulfillment.

True peace and fulfillment, God's definition of success, only come

when a person accepts Jesus into his heart and asks for forgiveness of his sins. It is a matter of humility and letting go rather than continually grasping for more. We need to quit working so hard to appear like we have it all together and, instead, let God smooth our rough edges and reveal our inner beauty.

God works much like a sculptor who chips away at an unshapely block of marble until the magnificent creation inside is released. When a person allows Christ into his heart, it is like the sculptor, who, seeing the stone's internal beauty and potential, chooses it as his future masterpiece. From that point until completion, it is the sculptor who makes the stone beautiful, not the rock itself. After a person gives his heart to Jesus, He will attend to the work of making that person His masterpiece.

Granted, it's not effortless on our part. We have to yield to His will and follow His guidance, but it's a wonderful process. It is similar to a winding country road with hills, bumps, twists, and turns: you may be shaken up at times, but the view is awesome and the ride is never boring.

To God, you are a one-of-a-kind jewel, created like no other. That is something to be celebrated. He created all of us just the way we are – even stackers, filers, makers, and maintainers. (Stackers in denial – go back and re-read the preceding sentence). Just between you and me....I think God is a stacker and maintainer.

Love a lot and laugh a lot. It's the best thanks you can give Him.



# THE LATIN CROWD

**A**BOUT a million years ago, when I was a student at Texas A & M University, I became close friends with a fellow student named Sergio. Sergio is a Mexican National, and when we were not together, he hung out with a group of his friends known to themselves as *the Latin Crowd*.

They were very nice people, and the places they called home were located in just about every Spanish speaking country south of the United States. All of them spoke Spanish as a first language, and they did most things together as a group. They were going to have a party one night and Sergio asked me to go with him. I politely denied the invitation because I did not know them, nor did I speak the language. My biggest fear is that of rejection, and with those two whoppers hanging over my head, there was no way I was going to go.

Sergio, however, wouldn't take "no" for an answer and badgered me mercilessly until I finally caved. On the way to the party, I sat quietly in the car, shaking my head in disbelief, wondering where my spine had gone and why I was placing myself squarely in front of this rapidly-approaching steamroller of rejection.

The next thing I knew, we were standing at the door, about to knock. I was terrified. Through the door we could hear Latin music, talking, laughing—the whole nine yards. My pulse shot beyond the heart-attack threshold, and then Sergio knocked – very loudly. It was the moment of truth. I wanted to run but decided it was time be a man and face my fears. Sergio, on the other hand, did run! Without any warning, he took off around the side of the building and left me standing there alone like some idiot on a mission to find friends.

A girl with a big, bright smile answered the door, and when she saw

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me, her face dropped and the whole room got quiet. She was expecting a friend and, instead, saw “the lone stranger.” All I could do was get a stupid grin on my face and say, “Sergio...” while pointing in the direction he had run. Silence. Tension. Fear of rejection realized! Then, Sergio finally came back around the corner laughing so hard he could barely walk.

At that point I really wanted to go home, but instead I was dragged into a room full of strangers speaking a foreign language. Oh, the fun I was having. A little while into it, one of the guys noticed that I could not communicate and shouted to everyone, “We have a person here who does not speak Spanish. Let’s be polite.” After that, everyone spoke English the rest of the night. (I just wanted to hug that guy.) I could not believe how nice everyone was and how accommodating. It turned out to be a really fun party, and I was glad I went after all.

You know, humor was created by God, and I think He frequently uses it to play with us. I think He occasionally puts us into positions where we feel nervous, but there is not any real danger. Then, like Sergio, he hides around the corner and watches our reaction. I bet he gets deep belly laughs sometimes. Then, when the time is just right, he comes out and leads us through it, and it turns out for the best.

One of God’s main goals is to share life with you. He wants to share everything from pain to pleasure. Many times, however, we get stuck in the rut of keeping God on a shelf until we need Him. Or, we turn to him often, but it is only for help and things we want. I think He loves providing those things for us, but I think He wants to share our laughter, too.

Sergio and I still laugh about that time at the door. Sure, I was scared and miserable for a little while, but there was never any danger, and it makes the laughter that much better when reminiscing.

When you are facing a difficult situation, face it head on, and maybe if you are really attentive, you will be able to hear God just around the corner snickering. He will take care of you. Trust Him, and you will see.

Love a lot and laugh a lot. It’s the best thanks you can give Him.

## YOU'RE BIG

**S**EVERAL years ago, while on vacation with my family in San Antonio, Matthew (3), asked me to give him a piggy back ride. He loved them and asked for them frequently, except he called them “pig rides.” (That name sort of fits, I guess, when you consider who the pig is.) I agreed and carried him through the hotel parking lot until we were about 30 yards from the front door. He dismounted, and as he ran toward the door, I called to him, “Hey, Matt. Now it's my turn.” He stopped and turned around with a rather confused look on his face. “It's your turn to give me a piggy back ride.” I said. Without missing a beat, he said, “You're big, but OK.” He walked toward me and tried his best to perform this impossible feat. With a little help from me, however, I was “carried” to the front door.

The thing in this that I thought was really cool was that Matt didn't do what I, or most other adults in his position, would have done: thrown out a bunch of excuses as to why it couldn't be accomplished. Personally, I would have used science to explain why the act was not possible and persisted in building and pleading my case until I was relieved of the task. But Matthew didn't do that. He knew it would be difficult and that it really was not the right way to do a piggy back ride, but if Dad told him he could do it, that was enough. He was going to try.

The Bible shows us that God has a special place in his heart for children. I bet that kind of trust and attitude are part of the reason why. As we get older, we become more complex in our thinking and reasoning skills. That is good and necessary to a point, but the downside is that we think and reason ourselves out of many of the blessings and thrills that God offers us.

In reality, we are his children and He is our Dad. That is not some

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theoretical mumbo jumbo to ponder for fun—it is fact. God is our spiritual Dad.

Sometimes bad things happen, but who better to help you through them than Dad? He can make good come from anything. And sometimes, if we trust Him enough to let our fears turn into excitement and expectation, life can become more unbelievable than our wildest dreams.

What does it take? It takes the faith of a child, the kind of faith that says, “You’re big, but OK” in the face of insurmountable odds.

Love a lot and laugh a lot. It’s the best thanks you can give Him.



# FIRST DAY AT WORK

**I**T was the first day of work at my new job as a banquet waiter for a large hotel. As with all new jobs, I was nervous and wanted to make a good impression. I reported to work in the required uniform, a tuxedo, and got my assignment – vacuuming the floors. I felt a bit overdressed for the job but decided to make the best of it.

The manager unveiled a huge beast of a machine that looked more like it should be ridden than pushed. After the initial operating instructions, he turned me loose in a large ballroom full of eight-foot round tables. Each table was covered with a tablecloth that flowed over its edge and left about four inches of material lying on the floor.

I was amazed at the suction power of the beast. Glitter and random trash didn't stand a chance. It was a "MAN VACUUM!" It is sad to say, but as a guy with powerful machinery in my hands, I was starting to have fun – too much fun. Suddenly, and to my complete surprise, the beast ate a tablecloth. It just sucked the entire thing all of the way into its belly. Panic, shock, horror and embarrassment washed over me! I shut it off and, thankfully, found a portion still hanging from its mouth like a tongue. I sheepishly looked around to see if anyone had noticed. Nobody! Yes! "I've got to work quickly," I thought. I tugged mightily on the remaining morsel and, low and behold, it came out. The beast gave up its meal.

After I composed myself, I began vacuuming again. This time I had much more awe and respect for the beast.

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As I approached the edge of another tablecloth, I made sure to stay at least six inches away. All of the sudden, and much to my surprise, the beast ate another one – sucked the whole fourteen-foot tablecloth into its mouth. Aagghh!

Quickly, very quickly, I repeated the steps to free it and then acted like nothing had happened. I finished my job with great haste and asked for a different assignment.

You know, it seems like my life, and probably yours, too, follows that pattern – especially when it comes to following God. We are going along just fine and then, suddenly, something unexpected happens. We work through it, try not to do it again and, wham, it happens again.

When we are really trying to do our best and mess it up, it is easy to feel like a failure, especially when we tackle the same things repeatedly. It is frustrating to say the least.

Everyone has personal struggles. They seem to plague us and, at times, appear to be insurmountable. Trying to fix them can make them worse, however, because it causes us to focus on the problems, which gives them power. Also, when our attempted remedy fails, especially for the 6,000<sup>th</sup> time, we feel less worthy of love and fear the possible repercussions even more. Oddly enough, the attempt to fix things many times results in failure, fear, and despair.

The great thing, however, is that if we leave it to God to resolve the issues, and not ourselves, He will work them out. All through the Bible, it says, “fear not.” It also says a great deal about how love and faith cancel out fear. The cliché of “Let go and let God” really does apply and work. (Now, don’t take this as an excuse not to do your part. You do have a part in it because God wants to work with you as a team. It’s just that your part isn’t as critical as you may think.) God needs to be the one leading.

If you are scared of looking to God and asking for forgiveness and guidance, don’t be. He’s not looking at you with accusation or disappointment in His eyes. He is looking at you through eyes of love. He is filled with excitement that you are coming home.

When He gets your life in sync with His, things will start taking on

new meanings. It will no longer be “Good god, morning,” but “Good morning, God.” Sunrises and sunsets will take on new beauty. God’s everyday gifts will start to be seen as blessings rather than mundane happenings. Try it. Try God. You’ll see.

Love a lot and laugh a lot. It’s the best thanks you can give Him.



## AIN'T NO WAY!

**I**T'S Christmastime as I write this, and I love Christmas. What a wonderful time of year. I know, some of it can be irritating, but that's the commercialized part of it. The sincere part, the love and giving, is fantastic.

Notice I'm using the title Christmas and not winter solstice, winter holiday, winter break or any other replacement term. I make no apologies for that. And do you know what...I don't think anyone reading this is offended or wants an apology. I think we all grew up with the season being called Christmas and still like it that way. So, to the media and the politically correct crowd...Merry Christmas! And I mean that. Be merry. There is a great reason to be merry. And thank God for it, because there *ain't no way* I would have done what He did.

When I think of my kids going through rough times or being hurt by someone, it drives me crazy. Recently, I had a horrible dream about something terrible being done to one of my kids and I woke up sweating, ready for battle. I'll do anything to protect them and keep them from harm. That is just the natural protective instinct of a parent. It is instilled in us by God and if *we* have it, you can bet that God has it, only to a much deeper degree. Even though His protective instinct is much stronger than ours, He was able to set it aside in order to accomplish the impossible.

I would no more "lend" my kids to a bunch of strangers – for their sakes – than kiss a rattlesnake on the lips. Yet, that is exactly what God did for us at Christmas. He sent his Son, Jesus, into the world in the most vulnerable form imaginable – a baby! A little, fragile baby! (He is the "All Powerful God." Why didn't He send the great warrior everyone was expecting?)

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God knew that bad things would happen to Jesus while He was here. He also knew the pain that both He and Jesus would endure throughout the process. He sent Him anyway, for our sakes.

Think about it. God knew that his “baby boy” would:

- Have multiple attempts on his life
- Be hated and rejected by people
- Be tempted by Satan in every conceivable way, even while spending forty days alone, fasting in the desert
- Be pushed and tested constantly
- Be tortured beyond all rationale (see *The Passion of the Christ*)
- Be killed in the most painful way possible

And why did He do this? Because He would rather die than spend eternity in heaven without us! Wow! It kind of highlights the “Merry” in “Merry Christmas,” doesn’t it?! I’ve never had a solstice, holiday, or break die for my sins. But Jesus did.

So, in spite of the political correctness movement and the tiny number of complainers that the media magnifies, I’ll keep saying “Merry Christmas.” How about you?

Love a lot and laugh a lot. It’s the best thanks you can give Him.

## DAD! DAD? DAD.

**I**MAGINE the shock that consumed me when I found out my fiancé was engaged to another guy at the same time she was engaged to me. When the story unfolded, I found out she had been seeing him for years and neither he nor I knew what had been going on. Oh, the hindsight lessons I learned from that period of my life! (Now you don't have to wonder why I'm bald. It's from a *fiancé* not DNA.)

After a whole lot of stress, misery and crying, I thought I had gotten it all out of my system and recovered. That is, until I was throwing out some things that used to belong to her. Waves of memories flooded my mind and it wasn't long before the old "misery truck" ran over me again.

I was in the garage by myself and was content to cry it out. (You can't hold that stuff in, you know. It'll come back and bite you later.) Between sobs, I looked up and noticed my Dad observing me from the back door. I was disappointed to see someone watching me, especially him.

My Dad is a great guy and I love him a lot, but in situations like that we usually end up in a long conversation – which I wasn't in the mood for at the time. Well, he came out, and as he neared, I prepared for the mandatory but well-meaning discussion.

It was then that he shocked my socks off. He didn't say a word. Not a word! He just hugged me. That really made me start blubbering. He held me and let me cry until I was finished. Then, to top it all off, he went back inside. He never said anything – out loud. He said more in those moments of silence, though, than hours of conversation.

You know, I think God is a lot like that. We think we have him

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figured out, at least somewhat, and then He throws us a curve ball. But, what a wonderful curve ball it is.

I believe what my Dad did was a reflection of the way that God hugs us silently every day. He does this by constantly wrapping us in sunshine, moonlight, love, and innumerable gifts. Come to think of it... maybe He does it this way because he can say a whole lot more by not saying anything at all.

Take time today to be still and listen in the silence. Keep your heart open, though, because that is where He does his best communicating.

Love a lot and laugh a lot. It's the best thanks you can give Him.



## HOT PURSUIT

**T**O say I dislike running is an understatement. I abhor it. I have a great appreciation for my ability to run, but I detest doing it for exercise. There are two reasons for my loathsome view of running: first, I have a massive aversion to lengthy bouts of misery, and second, I have a cardiovascular system rivaling that of an emphysemic mouse. My son, Matthew (6), on the other hand, seems to enjoy running quite a bit and does it frequently.

Recently, while driving through the family ranch on the way to the house, I came upon my family—Kimberly, Jack and Matthew—strolling down the road, collecting rocks. As so often happens with boys, a leisurely event turned into a fierce competition and this one was to see who could find the biggest, best, and most rocks. Jack was being selective and using strategy while Matthew was trying in vain to stuff even more stones into his already bulging pockets. The weight of the rocks was pulling his pants down, and every couple of steps he had to do a long side-step-rump-shuffle-hoist to get them back up.

Being hot and tired, they asked for a ride to the house. I agreed and everyone piled in. Just before I hit the gas, Matthew bailed out and told me he had come up with a better idea.

He started talking so fast that words were coming out of his mouth like water from a fire hose. I caught bits and pieces and discerned that he wanted to run home. I thought it was a little crazy but agreed and drove away while watching him in the rear view mirror. He surprised me with how quickly he ran. I thought he was having a great time, but I was wrong. Unknowingly, I left my son alone, awash in terror!

What appeared in the rear view mirror to be enjoyable exercise was actually a terrified child in hot pursuit, screaming his head off.

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His bulging pockets hindered his ability to run, and he did his best to ditch the biggest rocks as he ran. He was too scared to stop and unload the rest, so he held up his pants and continued to run while crying hysterically.

As he approached the house, I stood on the front porch ready to greet him. I garnered a grand smile and prepared to praise him highly for a great run. After all, he was maintaining a blistering pace.

When he arrived, I realized he was panic-stricken, scooped him up in my arms and held him tightly. I brought him inside, and he immediately curled up on his mother's lap, where she held him close as he cried it out.

Afterward he told me that he had wanted to run alongside the truck, not be left in the dust. It was only four hundred yards, but to a six year old, that is the same as being left alone in the middle of a ranch. It was a scary situation for him, especially when his imagination entertained the idea of lions and tigers and bears, oh my! I felt as guilty as a pig eating bacon.

After I had beaten myself up for what seemed the appropriate amount of time, I began to reflect on the incident, searching for nuggets of truth and glimpses of God. Instead of finding traces of wisdom, my mind locked onto a question: "What if people pursued God with the same intensity that Matthew chased the truck?"

When he was chasing the truck, everything else lost its importance. Nothing mattered except satisfying his deep compulsion to be with Mom and Dad. He knew that with us he would find the safety and comfort he craved so desperately.

On the same note, what if we recognized our intense need for Christ and the fact that without him we are utterly helpless? What if we experienced the searing fear that Matthew did, but it was because we recognized how empty we are without Jesus? What if we viewed our sin and materialism like the rocks in Matthew's pockets: excess baggage that trips us up and hinders our progress toward a deeper relationship with God? How much differently would we live our lives?

In the Bible, Paul uses the analogy of a race to describe faith in God

– persistence and fixation on the goal are needed to attain the prize.<sup>7</sup> Life is a race, too. The question is, which prize are we trying to win? Is it money and approval or Heaven and Jesus? How you answer that question defines which race you are running. One is a dead-end circuit that never leads anywhere, and the other is a cross country course with valleys of difficulties, peaks of achievement, beauty along the way, and heaven at the end. Which course are you running? Which do you want run? You can hop off the endless circuit at any time and begin to enjoy the cross-country course by turning your life and choices over to Jesus.

One last note about Matthew's ordeal; he never doubted that Mom and Dad would be there for him, and it's the same way with Jesus. He is always there for you – and not just at the finish line. Break out of your tunnel vision and look around: He just may be next to you, keeping stride.

Love a lot and laugh a lot. It's the best thanks you can give Him.



# GIFTS

**F**OLLOW me on this. If one day, out of the blue, you gave a person a dollar, they would be happy and thankful. If you gave them another dollar the following day, they would be almost as happy and thankful as the preceding day. If you gave them a dollar the third day, they would be thankful, but not as much as the previous two days. If you continued to give them a dollar every day, they would eventually take it for granted and even come to expect it. If you stopped giving it to them after the expectation was established, they would become angry and may even demand *their* dollar. Remember, however, the dollar was a gift in the first place.

This scenario illustrates the natural tendencies of man to become expectant and unappreciative over time – especially with the gifts that God gives us. He is so consistent with His giving that we not only take it for granted; we sometimes infer that it's not enough. For example, when people consider having faith in God, they often ignore what He gives on a daily basis and ask for more. Instead of acknowledging His gifts as proof of His existence and love for us, many people demand to see, hear, or feel Him before they will believe. The ironic thing is that they already see, hear, *and* feel Him on a daily basis – they just fail to recognize it.

His existence is obvious; it envelopes us continuously. He can be seen in the beauty of nature, the rising and setting of the sun, and the smile on a friend's face. He can be heard through the kind words that come our way, the counsel of a pastor or companion, and the singing of birds. He can be felt in the warmth of sunshine, the briskness of winter, and the caress of a gentle wind. Evidence of His existence and love

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abounds; it's just that our willingness to recognize it must be brought to life.

The best way to awaken our “sense of God” is to feed the spiritual side of our being. People are made up of four elements: mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual. We nurture three of the four regularly and too often leave out or neglect the spiritual element. If we take time to nurture the spiritual side of our being with quiet times and Bible study, praying, listening to God with our hearts, and attending a church that is alive with the Holy Spirit, we will experience God. When we are doing these things regularly, we will begin to see, hear and feel Him all around us.

Remember, He could have made the world a dull gray place without smells, sounds or variety – but He didn't. He could have been an angry God who thrilled to see us scurry and hide – but He isn't. Instead, He gave us a beautiful world full of colors, sounds, smells, tastes, and feelings. They are His way of saying, “I love you.”

Take in the beauty that surrounds you. Let it make an impression on your soul. Soon enough, you'll begin to see Him.

Love a lot and laugh a lot. It's the best thanks you can give Him.

## 40

**I**MAGINE that you are lost in a desert. It's hot and dry during the day and frigid at night. Water is scarce and food is not available. No one is searching for you and the nearest town is a long walk, forty days to be exact. What will you do? How will you survive?

Let's face it...if you live at all, you will be the next best thing to dead. In all likelihood, you will not be able to walk or talk. If you are able to utter a few words, you won't make any sense because hunger and dehydration will have destroyed your mental abilities. The intense loneliness will have probably caused insanity and, survival experts say suicide was probably contemplated, if not actually attempted.

It's not a pretty picture, is it? It is, however, what Jesus faced during his forty days of fasting in the desert. I don't think He went insane or attempted suicide, but I've talked to medical doctors who say that forty days without food in the desert would kill a person, period. So...if Jesus did it and lived (which I believe He did), He must have gone to points beyond our comprehension with respect to hunger, loneliness, and misery. It is only His divinity that brought him through it alive and sane.

This had to be one of the lowest points in His life. It definitely was one of His greatest times of need...and guess who showed up to kick Him while He was down? That's right, Satan!

Their discourse has been the foundation for many sermons. (Don't worry, I'm not going to follow suit.) Notice one thing, though: their battle was fought with words and not weapons. And not just any words, but Scripture itself. To me, that says words have real power and Bible verses are the most powerful of all. They can be used to slay the devil or – *watch out*– they can be used out of context by Satan to deceive you.

In real life, we may never go through the desert scenario described

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above. Everyone, however, has at one time or another experienced his or her own inner desert scenario – deep, prolonged feelings of desperation and hopelessness. We keep up appearances on the outside, but on the inside, many of us are dying of hunger – hunger for love, approval, acceptance, etc...and it's not just young people and teenagers either.

When we are at our lowest, we may say things that cause people to turn away, when what we really want is for them to stay and love us. People will say things like “I hate you” or “Leave me alone” when what they really mean is “Love me. Please!” It's a strange psychological phenomenon, but it is very real.

God has given each one of us the ability to “feed” people. So let's do it. Let's feed them what they need: love, acceptance, approval, and much more. Tell them you love them. Tell them you care. Or, if you want to go way out on a limb (and this is, by far, the hardest for me), let *them* speak and you just listen. If anything is more powerful than words, it is the silence of listening. Not hearing – listening. There is a huge difference.

Many times people get burned out on praying because God does not “speak” to them. I don't think He is ignoring them. On the contrary, I think He is loving them on a higher level by intently listening to the yearnings of their hearts.

Oh, and He does speak, He just doesn't always use words. He uses things that words can't fully describe like nature, the laughter of a little child, love, contentment, joy and so much more. Keep your senses alert, and you'll hear and see Him.

Some of this may seem like a contradiction, but the whole “words and listening” concept boils down to this: Words can be used for loving or fighting, whichever you choose. Listening, though, is just for loving. Think about it—you have never heard anyone say “I'm so mad...he *listened* to me!”

Love a lot and laugh a lot. It's the best thanks you can give Him.



## AIRPORTS

**D**URING a layover in the Houston airport, I decided to kill time by taking a long trek to a new food court. Upon my arrival, I noticed a man with a disability, struggling to walk. His steps were arduous and he used crutches designed for extra stability; they had large, square bases and tops that enclosed the length of each forearm. In an effort to make his journey through the airport easier, management had assigned him an aide.

They entered the food court and quickly picked a restaurant while I perused the joint for something that would hit the spot. In a matter of minutes, I bought lunch and was scanning the seating area for an available table. It was then that I noticed this gentleman eating by himself. His aide, apparently lacking in compassion, had done her job and left him alone, a scenario that I am sure he was used to. Something deep inside of me, I believe it was God, told me to go sit with him.

That thought set off an internal battle that would have made General Custer proud. My biggest fear was that I would not be able to understand him when he spoke. If that occurred, we would be left in a very awkward, nerve-racking situation. The battle raged in me for what seemed like forever. So, what did I do? Yep, I chickened out. I went and sat at a table behind him. As I ate, I stared at his back and tried to rationalize my decision.

No luck. After a while I couldn't live with my "chicken like" ways anymore and went to see if I could share his table. He looked up, surprised and said, "Yes." In very clear speech, he said, "Yes." Yes! I sat with him and we had a great conversation. He turned out to be a very interesting person who worked for a large insurance company while studying to become a lawyer.

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Soon, his aide came back and, curtly asked if he was ready to go. He looked at her, paused and said, “No. No, I’m not.” We continued talking until I had to catch my next flight.

The lessons I learned about fear from this encounter were humbling to say the least. There I was, in a position of unintended pride, feeling sorry for a man with a disability. That pride, and a good helping of fear, almost kept me from meeting an exceptional person and learning a lot about myself.

Fear was a big factor for me then, and it still is in my day-to-day life. It’s my biggest flaw and something I have to fight constantly. I learned then, and still do every day, that fear robs me of fulfillment in life. When I react in fear to the situations that life brings my way, the outcome is always contrary to what would have taken place had I reacted in love and faith.

The Bible says, “Perfect love casts out fear.”<sup>8</sup> What a huge point! God is love, and it is love that combats and subdues fear. A major part of love is focusing on God and others, not ourselves. If we are thinking of others and God to the degree that we forget about ourselves and what might happen to us, our fear will diminish or disappear completely. The more we focus on God and spend time with Him, the more we will learn to trust Him and that trust is what relieves fear.

If you have seen the movie *The Passion of the Christ*, you know that Jesus had every reason to be afraid. He knew what kind of pain and torture awaited Him, and He went through with it anyway. I don’t know about you, but I wouldn’t have *shown up for work* that day, but He did. Do you know why? Because perfect love casts out fear. Jesus loves us so perfectly that he was able to endure the pain, rejection, and humiliation. Awesome, huh?!

Enjoy life to its fullest and love others so much that you think it is unfair. When you are sure that you just can’t do anymore...keep loving.

Love a lot and laugh a lot. It’s the best thanks you can give Him.

## CAN'T CATCH A BREAK

**A** young firefighter named Allen had recently proposed to Janet, a beautiful young girl who worked at the local grocery store. She was everything he wanted in a wife and more. It took him almost a year to muster his courage, and when he finally asked for her hand in marriage, she tearfully accepted.

The wedding preparations were going smoothly until Allen found out that Janet was pregnant. He was absolutely devastated. He knew without a doubt the baby was not his because they had been saving themselves for marriage. The pain of betrayal ran so deeply that he decided to throw it all away and leave her.

On his way out of town, he visited with an elder from his church. The elder had become a mentor to him over the years and he felt that he had to say goodbye. Their conversation covered the full range of emotions, and in the end, Allen decided to forgive Janet and proceed with the marriage.

Allen prayed that he had made the right decision and that he would develop a deep love for the baby. At first it was very difficult, but as time went on, love seeped in and filled his heart.

The baby's due date was just a few days away when they had to rush out of town for an emergency. The only car they could afford broke down halfway to their destination, and they were forced to hitch-hike. Darkness was falling, and the only ride they could catch was in the back of a delivery van. The bumps, noise and frigid temperatures severely stressed Janet. She didn't know if she could endure the journey.

Allen felt like God was letting him down. He was doing his best to care for his new wife and unborn child, and he couldn't catch a break.

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To top it off, Janet was going downhill physically due to the abusive nature of the van ride. His frustration was immense.

When the driver of the van finally dropped them off, they were faced with a long walk to the nearest motel. It was cold and miserable, and on the way, Janet went into labor. The baby was coming quickly, and the only place Allen could find to lay his bride down was in the unlocked storage shed of an automotive garage.

A deep sense of failure completely encompassed him. He wanted his wife to be able to give birth in clean, safe surroundings. In reality, however, they were in a dirty shed without loved ones, doctors, or any help at all.

Let me stop here and tell you that the story of Allen and Janet is fictional. Allen and Janet represent Mary and Joseph, Jesus' parents, and their story is a modern day parallel to the historical account of Jesus' birth.

I've read the birth story of Jesus many times, but it wasn't until I read it to my kids recently that I considered the stress and confusion that Joseph may have felt. I may be wrong, but when I try to put myself into his shoes, it seems like feelings of doubt, frustration, and failure would have overwhelmed me.

Life sometimes surprises us with massive and unforeseen changes in direction. They can be very difficult and are always stressful. Everyone must endure them, and Joseph was no exception. His wife-to-be wound up pregnant and to explain it, she said God had blessed her with the baby and no other man had been involved. He found that explanation hard to believe and decided to leave her. Before he could go, however, God intervened by sending an angel to him with a message. In summary, the message said, "She's telling the truth. Don't leave her." He conceded and stayed.

Just before the baby was due, he had to put Mary on a donkey for a rough, sixty-five mile trek. When they finally reached the end of their journey, the local inn was full and she had to give birth, to Jesus of all people, in a stable full of animals. He must have felt like such a failure. I wonder if he questioned God's methods as the events transpired.

It's a natural human tendency to pre-plan life as we think it should unfold. We dutifully schedule events and then work like crazy to make sure the outcomes are as expected. When things go awry, as they so often do, we get angry, depressed, and frustrated with everyone and everything, including God. We wonder why God lets such things happen, especially when we are trying to follow Him and do His will.

I believe He sometimes lets difficult things happen to effect much greater results than we had originally planned. Take, for instance, the lives Mary and Joseph. God chose them to be the earthly parents to His one and only son, Jesus. That is the highest honor any human being could ever realize, and their lives did *anything* but proceed in an orderly fashion. They dealt with tremendous amounts of stress, chaos, and misery. Their persistent faith and obedience, though, was greatly rewarded – it helped change the history of the world – a goal that I'm sure Mary and Joseph never planned on their own.

I've noticed that God works in a wider context than just peace, order and tranquility. Many times he works in what seems like disorder, chaos, and misery. I think He does so because those are the conditions where we rely less on ourselves and more on God. Sometimes people need to get to the end of their ropes in order to truly "Let go and Let God." When we finally reach the point where we can get rid of "self," God will hasten to fill the void, and the result will be peace and fulfillment. That is where He wants us to be – at the point where we are filled with Him instead of ourselves. That is the point where true life begins.

If your life is challenging right now - or downright hard, give it to God and ask for help and guidance. Keep giving it to Him until you have given all of yourself, and then prepare to watch Him work. Who knows, He may be using you to achieve things that are beyond your wildest dreams.

God is trustworthy, even when He seems most distant. He promised us in the Bible that He would never abandon us or forsake us.<sup>9</sup> He is there for you, I promise.

Love a lot and laugh a lot. It's the best thanks you can give Him.



## FINE!!

**D**URING my career as a loan officer, I made frequent visits to real estate offices to chat with sales agents. On one particular visit, I was asking people how they were doing and I was getting what I call “*the FINE response*.” This response is the almost involuntary reaction of the human body when it is confronted with a question about how one is doing or how things are going. At the moment of the question, the body automatically spews out the word “fine.” “How are you?” “Fine.” “How are the kids?” “Fine.” “How’s your job going?” “Fine.” To me, *fine*, is a four letter word that begins with “F”! All it does is shut down conversations and make people distant.

One person I questioned was a lady named Terri. I asked her how she was doing, and, as she filed some papers, she said, “Fine.” I took this as a sign that she was too busy to talk and as I turned to leave she said, “Well not really. I just said that.” As it turns out, her 17-year-old nephew was in the middle of a very difficult battle with cancer. She told me the story and I listened intently. When she was done, I told her I would pray for his situation, and I meant it. I think we both left that conversation feeling a little better. Notice, however, that the conversation would never have happened if she would have stuck with her first answer, “Fine.”

A saying that children are very fond of is “Sticks and stones may break my bones but words can never hurt me.” Wrong! It should read “Sticks and stones may break my bones but *words can break my heart!*” Think about it. The times you’ve been hurt the most in your life are the times when someone has *said* something painful to you. Phrases like “I don’t love you anymore, you’re fat, you’re ugly, you’re stupid, I hate

### 3 MINUTES TO GOD

you” can rip a person to pieces emotionally. It doesn’t matter who you are, you know what I mean because you’ve been devastated by what someone has said to you at some time in your life.

Oddly enough, though, it just may be the things that are left unsaid that hurt the most. For example, I told a kid in Young Life, a ministry in which I am involved, that I loved him (in a purely brotherly/spiritual way) and he started to cry because nobody, not even his parents, had ever told him that before!

Words are incredibly powerful. The Bible speaks to the fact that words can lift people up or crush them. They can soothe pains or start wars – literally. Then it goes on to say that the tongue cannot be tamed.<sup>10</sup> That is scary. Think about how many times we end up in a situation where we have hurt someone and wish we could take back what we have said. The tongue is small, but very powerful. There is a tremendous amount at stake, and the only chance we have of controlling what we say is with God’s help. I guess when God says we are supposed to rely on Him for everything, He means, even the little things like words.

Another thing that struck me is that in the Bible, the book of John starts off with “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” Now that may be confusing, but one thing is clear: God himself counts words as the most important thing, even to the point that the He, Himself, is the Word.

For me, this realization makes me want to use my words (now I sound like I’m talking to a 2 year old – “use your words...”) to lift people up and make the world around me a better place. Maybe I can even lift God up by praising Him – which is what I think the whole meaning of life is, anyway.

Here is an assignment, and *there will be a test*. In the next 10 minutes, go out of your way to say something to make someone feel good. Then, do it again for the following 10 minutes and repeat.

Don’t worry about being eloquent. Think about this: fishermen are known for stretching the truth during the course of a normal story, and, even so, God picked them to be his closest friends while he was here on



## SHOOTING COWS

earth. He understands and is very patient. He loves you more than you will ever know.

Love a lot and laugh a lot. It's the best thanks you can give Him.



# RIDDLE

**H**ERE'S a riddle for you. What is painful, a giant nuisance, prevents fun, makes children cry, adults curse, splinters and will stop a sporting event for a quick time-out that everyone agrees upon and understands? C'mon, don't continue reading. Stop! Try to figure it out before you see the answer. You have twenty seconds.... Go!

Alright, you're back. I know that no one reading this cheated and everyone really did try to figure it out. The answer is grass burrs. You may call them sticker burrs, sand burrs, or cockle burrs, but the names all mean the same thing, sharp pain. Grass burrs are those little balls of spikes that embed themselves in your socks, shoe laces, pants, feet, fingers or anything else they touch while you are walking through the grass.

You may be wondering how grass burrs have anything to do with God. Well, they do and it's not the fact that He created them. I always tell people that there is something good to be found in everything, so I decided to put myself to the test. I took one of the things in which I couldn't see any good and tried to find the silver lining. Guess what! I found it! It took a very long time, but I found it. As much as I hate to admit it, I found not one, but several positive aspects of grass burrs.

The first thing I came up with is Velcro. Yep, in 1948 George de Mestral had grass burrs on his pants, analyzed how they were attached, and invented Velcro. I think you will agree with me that Velcro is great stuff (except when trying to be quiet while hunting, but that is another story). We can thank grass burrs for Velcro being part of our everyday lives.

The next thing and the biggest by far is that I actually saw a

### 3 MINUTES TO GOD

correlation between God's love for us and grass burrs. If you read the Bible and also open your heart to God, you find that God's love has the following similarities to grass burrs. God's love is persistent, and if you have ever tried to rid your yard of grass burrs, you know just how persistent they can be. God will love you no matter what – and grass burrs will grow no matter what. You cannot kill a grass burr and you cannot kill God's love for you either. God's love will get your attention and alter your lifestyle – grass burrs will, too. God's love does not discriminate and neither do grass burrs. Neither one of them care about color, wealth, address etc... they will both get you if they have the chance.

I have a friend who says everything in nature is a reflection of God in some form or fashion. Maybe he is right. One thing I know for sure is that it is fantastic and reassuring that God's love for me is as persistent and clingy as a grass burr.

So...the next time your life has to come to an abrupt halt so you can angrily pull out a grass burr, think about God's love sticking to you like that. Pretty cool, huh?!

Just because I have found a silver lining to grass burrs does not mean I have found one for everything, yet. Mosquitoes, for instance, are one of those things in which I can't find any good. I cannot describe the depth to which I disdain mosquitoes. I could write an entire book filled with the negative things I have to say about them. But I guess that just goes to show that I am still a work in progress. Maybe, one day, I will be able to come up with something good about mosquitoes. Right now, though, (in my best Texas dialect) it ain't happenin'!

(I know some of you are hopping up and down to tell me that there is something good about mosquitoes: they feed frogs, birds, bats etc. I've considered that point and have come to the conclusion that there are many other insects upon which they can feast. Mosquitoes are not necessary for their survival. Overruled!)

Love a lot and laugh a lot. It's the best thanks you can give Him.

# PANIC DROWNING

**T**HE Florida Keys! Yes! Snorkeling, swimming, fishing, and, did I mention snorkeling? The excitement was bubbling over as my family and I boarded the plane. Finally, the week we had been longing for was upon us.

During the flight, I imagined the fun and experiences we would share. I was ecstatic. My son, Jack (9), had been snorkeling by himself since he was three. He was addicted to it. My other son, Matthew (4), fell in love with it as soon as he was introduced to the sport. Visions of us floating together over coral reefs filled my mind.

When we finally arrived, we found our condo to be located mere feet from the water. We could literally fish and snorkel right out our back door. It was beautiful. The shore was lined with shade trees and there were even coconuts scattered on the sand.

As soon as we could put our bags down, we hit the beach. The next thing I knew, I was in the water, three feet from shore with two scared kids clinging to me for dear life. What was the impending doom of which they were so afraid? A thin layer of decaying leaves that lined portions of the bottom. (They are yucky, you know) I tried to get them to ignore the yucky areas and focus on the sand, rocks and fish. Nothing worked; not pep talks, reminders of past fun, guilt trips—nothing. It was chaos.

Finally, Jack relented and gave it a try. He relaxed and even started to enjoy it as long as I held his hand and walked through the water alongside him. Matthew wouldn't have anything to do with it, and I had to carry him with my free arm so his head wouldn't get wet. (We're having fun now.)

It didn't take long for the needle on the fun meter to plummet to

zero. I turned the caravan around and retraced our exploits so we could exit the water.

While I was helping Matt pick his way through the rocks that led to shore, Jack got the “there’s yucky stuff on the bottom and I don’t want my feet to touch it” panic. What started as mild panic rapidly increased into major panic, and the situation began to worsen. Up until that point, I refused to help him because I was trying to teach him how to work himself through panic. Seconds later, I decided that enough time had elapsed and gave him survival orders. “Put your feet down!” I barked. That’s all he had to do. The water was shallow enough for him to stand and there wasn’t any yucky stuff in the area.

The level of panic had gone farther up the scale than I originally thought; he was irrational – still in shallow water, but irrational nonetheless. I repeated the orders with more force and still didn’t get a response. As the seconds went by, his panic meter tapped out. He went into full blown, out-of-control hysteria. He started to flail in circles and, in the process, pushed himself out into deeper water. As soon as that started, I took one step, leaned over and pulled him in. He was that close to me. The whole episode took about twenty seconds, but what a stressful twenty seconds they were.

Later, I talked to the kids about how Jack let panic take him from a position of safety to a position of danger when all he had to do was put his feet down. We discussed it for quite some time because I wanted them to understand how panic always makes things worse.

That evening, as I sat on the shore thinking about the events of the day, I noticed the whole “drowning” scene was parallel to our dealings with life and God. There are many times in life that we get so worked up over our jobs, income, activity schedule, kids, etc. that we live in a panic.

When we are panicked, we get tunnel vision. We lose sight of everything that matters: our friendships, our family, beauty, goodness, God, and more. Without those things to balance us out and calm us down, life becomes one long hysterical trek that we have to survive until we die.

God does not mean for life to be lived that way. Satan does, but God does not. God knew that life would be full of problems and, therefore,

gave us a solution to those problems, peace. He gave us His Son, the Prince of Peace.

If you are stuck in the downward spiral of panic and rush, take note. There is a way to stop it, and all you have to do is put your feet down. Forget about the “yucky stuff” going on around you and put your feet down. If you do this simple, but difficult task, you will find that there really isn’t anything yucky down there at all. There is Jesus. He’s there. Always has been, always will be. He is the firm, sure footing for which we are searching.

You may be thinking, “This is metaphorical. How do I put my feet down in real life?” It is done by trusting Jesus. Start by telling Him your fears and why those things frighten you. Next, ask Him to be with you as you face them and then charge head on like you have the God of the universe backing you up. An important thing to note, however, is that facing your fears sometimes means doing less or nothing at all. It depends on the situation, and Jesus will let you know what to do.

The Bible says that God makes all things work for the good of those who love in Him.<sup>11</sup> When you trust Him and face your fears with Him, you’ll get to experience the truth in this promise first hand. He won’t let you down.

Love a lot and laugh a lot. It’s the best thanks you can give Him.





# EXTREME MAKEOVER HOME IMPROVEMENT

**I**MAGINE Cassandra, a cute little girl, lying motionless in a hospital bed, blankly staring at *white walls*. Television is not allowed in the room because she has just finished a round of chemotherapy and the medicine makes her hallucinate. She is bald, frail and in pain.

If it were me, I'd be thinking of three people: me, myself and I. She wasn't. The reason I know this is because of the T.V. show, *Extreme Makeover – Home Improvement*. It sounds strange, I know, but my sister-in-law worked on the filming of this particular episode and she learned all about Cassandra.

Instead of giving in to a self-centered, negative point of view, she did something to help others: something small, something a sick child could do – she wrote a letter. She sent it to the producers of the show and asked them to makeover the cancer wing of the children's hospital. It was her way of helping the kids who were still fighting the disease and honoring the children who had passed away.

In her letter, she said it was a good hospital, but not geared towards children, especially children who are fighting for their lives. One of the things she noted with special passion were the plain, white walls. She and the other kids detested them. They were so boring, cold, deathly. A small room with barren, white walls is not the ideal setting for a child who may be passing from life to death. She had seen too many of her friends pass away staring at those darn white walls.

She also brought attention to the “bad news room.” It was a bland, lonely room where they would bring the children to deliver bad news. More white walls.

### 3 MINUTES TO GOD

Disney came in armed with the motto: “no more white walls” and their usual, flamboyant style. They went to work and gave the place an Extreme Makeover. I’ve seen the pictures from behind the scenes, and what they did was amazing. There were colors and cartoons everywhere. They even brought in the Disney characters to play with the children. One picture from that day stands out in my memory. It shows a group of kids hugging Mickey Mouse. They are smiling and laughing so hard that their lack of hair and ample supply of chest tubes almost go unnoticed. What a makeover – and, I think, an extra chance at life due to the up-lifting of their spirits.

There are two major lessons to take from this. First, notice that she did it for others. She did not intentionally benefit from what Disney did because she had already been discharged. She did, however, benefit greatly because as a surprise, they made over her home, too. Second, note what a difference one person can make – even a little girl that has been knocked down by cancer.

We can all be mighty forces in life if we focus on others instead of ourselves and have faith in God. He will take our efforts and multiply them to make “mighty” things happen. He likes to do it and He’s really good at it. You’ll see.

Love a lot and laugh a lot. It’s the best thanks you can give Him.

# TAG!

**S**QUEALS and laughter filled the air as the kids chased each other around the house. Tag was the game of the day. Round and round they'd go, when they'd stop, nobody knew – especially their parents. Their age difference, five years, mandated that Jack allow Matthew to catch him once in a while. It kept Matthew from getting frustrated and let Jack milk the game for all it was worth.

After watching them for some time, I started contemplating the game of tag and decided that there really is no point. One person chases the other, and if the pursuer catches his target, the tables turn and the game goes on...and on and on...There's no winning or losing. No prize. No title to be attained. What's the point?!

It was then that I realized the cynicism in my thoughts. In looking for *a* point, I had missed *the* point. The point is in the playing of the game, not the outcome. The laughter and squeals don't come after the game, but during it. In fact, after the game, the joyful sounds stop. What a jaded, sad, "adult" way of thinking.

God has a special love in his heart for children. Maybe it's because they "get it" and adults don't. Children love the game, and adults love results. At what point do we go from being children, in that respect, to being adults? At what point do we lose sight of what is important? Why is it so hard to get it back?

Tag isn't just for children, you know. God plays it with us every day, twenty-four hours a day. He pursues us with a passion. Unfortunately, if He is pursuing, that means we are running. Some of us are running with our whole being and some are just trying to keep part of ourselves from Him. The lucky ones, however, have allowed themselves to get caught – completely. They are lucky, because when God catches you, the

### 3 MINUTES TO GOD

tables not only turn, the game gets better. That is the point at which the game ends and life truly begins. Yes, it is still one following another, but instead of a chase, it is God leading us. Hang on, though, because the ride gets exciting and wild.

To quote that great theologian (just kidding), Steven Tyler, lead singer for the band Aerosmith, “Life’s a journey, not a destination!” Just like the game of tag, where the game itself is the point, life is about the journey, not where we are or how much we own at its conclusion.

Slow down, get caught, and learn to really enjoy life with God. Remember, one of the things He loves best is seeing us enjoy His gift of life.

Love a lot and laugh a lot. It’s the best thanks you can give Him.

## LOST AT SEA

**S**ALTWATER engulfed everyone as a large wave crashed into our tiny boat. It snapped us out of our respective dazes, and we began frantically bailing water with anything that was available. What had begun as a wonderful snorkeling adventure had turned into a life-and-death situation.

It all started when my family and another family were on vacation together in the Florida Keys. We rented two twelve-foot boats, piled four people into each, and went three miles offshore to snorkel over a reef. Everyone was having a wonderful time until my friend, Mark, and his father, Louis, got tired and returned to the hotel. That left six people in one tiny boat – a situation that almost proved fatal.

Everything continued to go well until we decided to call it a day. My father tried to pull-start the engine, but it wouldn't turn over. Immediately, I knew that we were stuck. He kept trying and, eventually, the pull-cord broke and recoiled into the engine. At that moment, without any tools to free the rope, all hopes of the motor starting vanished for good. A heavy feeling of doom washed over us.

Being just three miles from land and safety is frustrating because we could see the lights on shore and even cars driving but couldn't contact anyone. Swimming was out of the question because the waves were getting big, and there were too many sharks. And, to top it all off, cell phones hadn't been invented yet. All we could do was wait.

All six of us were wet, and the howling wind was sapping our bodies of heat. We were quickly becoming cold and scared, hoping beyond hope that Louis and Mark would come to the rescue. No such luck, they had fallen asleep.

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As the sun sank over the horizon, it highlighted a large storm headed our way. Shortly after dark, the storm hit with torrents of frigid rain and extremely high winds. Several of us got seasick as the storm whipped the waves into large, choppy peaks. Frequently, they broke into our boat and we had to bail feverishly to stay afloat. All around us, fish were jumping trying to stay away from the sharks.

The only thing we could do was huddle together on the floor of the boat and shiver. Every few minutes someone would have to temporarily pull away from the group to become violently ill. Despite the raging storm, I could see one prominent star. It was the only stationary, calm object I could see. I fixated on that star and prayed to God for a long time.

On three separate occasions, our spirits lifted as boats headed in our general direction. But each time our hopes would get crushed as they passed us by and disappeared over the horizon.

Then, finally, we saw a large boat launch from the hotel with a search light. Our excitement momentarily took the place of fear until it turned and started cruising down the coast, away from us. The situation was bad and getting worse.

Much later, with the storm dramatically increasing in intensity, the vessel with the search light returned and began to scour the area. Several times its beam of light hit us directly but kept moving. They continued searching for a long time but eventually gave up and headed back to the hotel.

We were absolutely devastated. The storm was increasing in ferocity, and we were not sure we could make it through the night. Suddenly, for no obvious rhyme or reason, the search boat turned around and came straight to us. We were found! The feelings of thankfulness, excitement, and relief that I felt as I boarded the savior vessel are beyond my ability to describe in mere words. All I wanted to do was get to shore and warmth.

Later, we found the answers to several of our concerns; Mark and Louis had awakened, called the Coast Guard, and were told that all of the Coast Guard's assets were tied up in drug interdiction duties and

would not be available for several hours; the reason the search boat went down the shore at first was because they had water in the fuel lines and the engines quit; the reason they could not see us when they hit us directly with the search light was because the sides of our small boat blended in with the breaking waves and, to top it off, our boat did not have running lights. The best part of the story has to do with why, after Mark, Louis, and the captain of the search boat had given up, they suddenly turned around and came straight to us. It seems that when they called off the search, the captain began to pray. He told God he would give it one more try and begged for direction. That is when he snapped the boat around and came straight to us. Coincidence? I think not.

I think back on that incident fairly often and, over the years, have noticed something. Just as our little group desperately wanted to be found that night, people in general, yearn to be “found” in their daily lives. They want to be found out, discovered, known to the depths of their beings, and loved.

The deepest part of each of us wants desperately to be known for who we are –who we really are, not who we pretend to be. Then, on top of that, we want to be loved. If we are loved by someone who really knows us, then we are truly loved. It is risky, however, because if someone really knows us and then rejects us, they are rejecting who we truly are, and that hurts deeply. It is scary. But it is worth the effort. When we are known and loved, we feel like we have been found. And let me tell you, being found when you really, really want to be found is joy that cannot be described.

Here is something to think about. God already knows you. He knows you better than you know yourself....and He loves you deeply. He loves you so much that he died for you. “Yeah, but that’s not the same as being loved by another person,” you say. No it's not, but it is better and worth making the effort to know Him. Take some time, be quiet, pray and then, as scary as it may be, have the faith to let Him lead your life. You’ll come to know Him and His love in a way you may have

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never experienced. Pretty soon you will find that you only care what He thinks and that what others think really is not that important anymore.

Let yourself be found! It is much better than trying to endure the storms of life alone while you are lost at sea.

Love a lot and laugh a lot. It's the best thanks you can give Him.



# TRAGEDY TO TRIUMPH

**T**ERRI Schindler Schiavo, a wonderful young lady, made world-wide news in 2005. I'm sure she never meant to become famous, but her trials and tribulations became the focus of millions of people.

Terri, if you recall, was the woman who some doctors said was in a persistent vegetative state (a point that is very debatable) due to a severe medical problem years earlier. Her brain was starved of oxygen and badly damaged. As a result, she needed twenty-four-hour care. Terri's family was more than willing to take on the duties, but her husband was adamantly against it. He claimed that Terri would not want to live in such a state and demanded she be deprived of food and water until her demise.

Many people sided with the Schindler family and tried to stop the court rulings that mandated Mr. Schiavo's wishes be fulfilled. The Governor of the State of Florida, the President of the United States, and even the Pope got involved. All of this, however, was to no avail and Terry passed away March 31, 2005 – after thirteen days without food or water.

My reason for bringing up this event is not to sway you to one side of the issue or the other, but instead highlight how God can use anyone in any condition to accomplish amazing things. He used Terri's situation to achieve something that you and I will probably never be able to do: get the nation and much of the world to drop to their knees in prayer.

Which outcome they were praying for is not the point. The point is that so many people were praying. When a person prays, it opens up the lines of communication with God, and when that happens, God is pleased and lives are changed.

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Scripture says “God can make all things work for the good of those who love Him.”<sup>12</sup> Terri and her family love God and, I believe, it was their prayers and openness to Him that made it so a profoundly disabled lady could be used to bring so many people together in prayer.

If God can use Terri to accomplish such a marvelous feat, He can use you to achieve more than you’ve ever dreamed possible. He has given you gifts to be used as tools during your stay here on earth. You may think your gifts are not special, but God does, and He is the one that counts. Step out in faith and use your gifts for God’s glory. He will bless your effort, and you will be able to sit back and watch Him work. It’s truly amazing. Try it, you will see.

Love a lot and laugh a lot. It’s the best thanks you can give Him.

# IRONING

**T**HE other day I was ironing my clothes and...Yes, I iron. Don't act so surprised. In fact, I am the Zen Master of ironing. I can do it all. From cotton to silk, even pleats, I am the master. (Ok, enough patting myself on the back.)

As I was going over my clothes, I started thinking, and those who know me well know that when I start thinking it can lead to some strange ideas and actions. For example, I owned 24 emus at one time in my life. It actually scares my wife when I approach her and say, "I was thinking..."

Back to the story. As I ironed I contemplated the different temperatures and settings that are required for smoothing various materials. Cotton takes high heat and steam while silk takes very low heat and no steam. Silk may even require something like tissue paper or a thin cloth to be placed between the iron and the material. Every material has its own look, function, and set of conditions that make it transform from wrinkled and ugly to crisp and presentable.

People are a lot like that. Some of us are like cottons – cool, comfortable and easygoing, but require lots of heat and steam to change. Some of us are like silks – beautiful, soft and delicate, requiring very little heat to transform. Still others of us are a combination, a blend if you will, with their own unique recipe of forces required for improvement.

Just like it takes heat and sometimes steam to transform wrinkled material into great looking clothes, it frequently takes hard times in life to get us into a closer relationship with God. My experience with God shows me that He will do whatever it takes to get our attention. He wants us to love Him and live for Him. That is the meaning of life, and everything falls into place when we do those things. He knows this and

### 3 MINUTES TO GOD

wants desperately to have us experience the joy and peace that come through living in a relationship with Him.

It is easy to look around and focus on the unfairness of life. Some people seem to have it so easy while others don't ever seem to get a break. We may wonder "Why is this happening to me?", "Why is so and so going through that?" or any of a thousand other questions. While I don't think that God causes those things, I do think He allows them to happen and will make them work out for our good if we will work with Him.

If people are like the clothes we iron, and if God wants us to come to know Him, then He has to allow the necessary amounts of "heat and steam" to be applied in order to get us, His material, to respond. If we do not respond, we will continue to receive "heat and steam" until we do. When we do finally respond (if we do – it is all a choice, you know), we get to experience a relationship with God which is well worth all of the challenges required to get us to that point. Life will not always be easy after that point, but it will be filled with the peace and a confidence that only come from knowing God intimately.

Sometimes, when my life is difficult, I feel like I'm that worn out pair of jeans that is ripped up and faded. Yeah, they are comfortable, but think about the amount of heat, steam, patching and dyeing it would take to make them like new again. *Oh to be silk sometimes.* Think about it.

Love a lot and laugh a lot. It's the best thanks you can give Him.

# SPECIAL FORCES

**T**HE Special Forces of the United States Military are an incredible band of professional soldiers. They endure and accomplish things that ordinary citizens deem impossible. They are the embodiment of loyalty to country and a big reason I have the freedom to write.

Cable channels frequently have programs showcasing the extreme training of the Special Forces, in particular the Navy Seals – an organization that both captivates and inspires me. Their commitment to duty, team, and being one’s absolute best is incredible.

The documentary that covers the training of Navy Seal class 234 depicts an individual being reviewed for substandard performance. An instructor lectures him on what it truly means to be a Navy Seal. The instructor pounds home the point that a soldier is not a Seal from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. every day; a soldier is a Seal twenty-four hours a day. There is no break. There is no down time. He stressed emphatically that being a Seal is a lifestyle. It is something they live, eat, and breathe every minute of every day. If they don’t, they die – or someone else dies. It is that simple and that difficult. The stakes are high, and the playing field is tougher than tough.

Two things come to mind when I think of the United States Special Forces: first, I would hate to go into combat against them, and, second, I am glad they do the job they do. It is due, in part, to the Special Forces that my family and I can sleep soundly at night. To the members of the Special Forces and American soldiers everywhere, I say, “Thank you!”

Believe it or not, there are similarities between the Special Forces and what it takes to be a committed Christian. Specifically, it is the idea that Christianity is a lifestyle to be lived out twenty-four hours a day.

### 3 MINUTES TO GOD

If a person truly lets Christ into his heart and turns all choices over to Him, Christianity will become a twenty-four/seven lifestyle. It will cover everything between waking up in the morning to going to be at night. It will govern how a person thinks, talks, treats others and himself, and how he acts when he is alone. It is not a set of rules that form a cage within which we must live; it is a relationship with Jesus that guides us into depth of faith and freedom in living.

Faith in Christ gives freedom from guilt, shame, and slavery to sin. It gives meaning to the little things like the phrase “Good morning.” Without faith in Christ, it is simply a polite platitude. With faith in Christ, it is real. It is a good morning because the person saying it knows he has one more day to love others, Christ and himself. He has another day to enjoy the gifts that God gives him – the same gifts he used to take for granted. Every detail of every day has meaning to the committed Christian.

Too often, however, Christians, including myself, compartmentalize their faith. They separate faith from business, portions of relationships, and even certain actions. I can honestly say that there have been times in my life when I preferred to do business with non-Christians rather than Christians because the Christians wanted special treatment and discounts for their faith. I have been told by Christians to separate my morals and faith from business transactions. Many Christians believe that faith and business are mutually-exclusive and should never be mixed. That is not what Jesus wants, and it is the result of rationalizing what it means to live out the Christian life.

If the Special Forces compartmentalized their training and efforts, they would not only be half the force that they are, but their effectiveness would also plummet. If Christians quit compartmentalizing the application of their faith, we would become a massive force for Christ – a huge wave of hope an inspiration to billions of people around the world.

Walking with Christ takes guts and commitment. He will lead you through places that scare you to death, but if you hang on to Him, you will come out of it stronger and with a deeper faith. He will also

lead you to heights of joy you have not known before, and from those times you will emerge peaceful and eager to continue the march. Compartmentalizing faith diminishes life because it is like living a lie.

Throw away the compartments and give yourself completely to Christ. It is worth the risk and effort. Hang on tightly, though – it's going to be a wild ride.

Keep this truth deep in your heart: Christ does not want what you can do for Him. He wants you – all of you!

Love a lot and laugh a lot. It's the best thanks you can give Him.





# I'M DYING

**P**LEASE allow me to be totally open and vulnerable: to allow you to truly see my heart and that we struggle with many of the same things.

It is very hard for me to write this. In fact, I've been crying as I think about it, and I don't know why. Maybe it's my sense of failure with respect to the list below.

I'm not dying physically. In fact, I don't seem to be dying at all, and that's the problem. In a past, philosophical moment, I made a list of the things I want to die to. The list had been packed away and forgotten about until I found it today.

At the time I originally wrote it, I had a vision for the kind of person I wanted to be at this moment in my life. As I read it today, I was hit by the fist of reality because I realized how far I am from that goal. I guess that is the source of my sadness. The list may repeat, but remember, it was not written for publication. The characteristic I want to improve upon is listed first and is followed by the method of accomplishing the task. This is the actual, unedited list.

## Things I Can Die To:

**My comfort zones** - by doing what my wife and kids want to do with enthusiasm.

**My fears** - by living in the moment and giving it to God.

**My need for personal time** - by doing the burdensome tasks I have laid upon my wife.

**My need to be right** - by truly listening without anger.

**My need for personal time** - By doing "honey do's."

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**My fear** - by loving my wife and kids extravagantly.

**My resentments** - by being vulnerable enough to express my feelings and listen.

**My feelings of impending doom** - by living/loving with enthusiasm and a positive attitude.

**The future and past** - by living in the moment.

**Reserved love** - by loving extravagantly (What is worse than reserved love?).

**Figuring it all out** - out by living in the moment and being enthusiastic.

**My belief of the definition of success** - by letting go and focusing on God's values.

I don't know if you can relate to the struggle that is encompassed in the list above, but I hope you can. I hope this helps you to know that you aren't alone in your fight against personality flaws like these.

Fear and negativity are the two biggest foes I have. Many people who know me will be shocked to hear that, but it is because I fight them constantly. Sometimes it feels like a losing battle, but I know it isn't.

Jesus led by example – an example that He thinks is possible for us to follow. What was His example? He completely died to “self.” He loved extravagantly and without reservation. He lived in the moment, with enthusiasm. He kept on loving even when others hurt Him, or worse, ignored Him. Ultimately, He died physically so that we could be with Him for eternity in heaven. To sum it all up, He loved and lived despite fear and with enthusiasm. We can do that. I know we can. *He* knows we can!

Yes, I sometimes feel like a failure because I am not nearly the man I want to become. But I'm better than I used to be and it's because of Jesus.

He really is here for us, and He is worth the effort. Keep your eyes open and you'll see Him all around you.

Love a lot and laugh a lot. It's the best thanks you can give Him.

## JUST SAY THANK YOU!

**B**EING verbally ripped to shreds by my cousin, David, in front of a small crowd is what I remember most about our family reunion. David was thirty years old, had a long beard and looked very tough – lumberjackish if you will. I, on the other hand, was a twelve year old boy, with big glasses who thought he was cooler than cool. As you can see, the two of us were not a natural fit.

Immediately prior to the shredding mentioned above, David's brother, Robert, and I were playing doubles tennis together. We were teammates. I'll never know who decided to punish him by slotting me as his teammate, but I consider that cruel and unusual punishment. You need to realize that having me as a tennis partner helps move the game forward about as much as a truck with four flat tires hauling an elephant uphill. In fact, I play so badly that I was relegated to standing mere inches from the net, on the centerline. That was my *zone*. I was told not to move and if the ball came anywhere near me I should swat it straight down. Since I was so close to the net, hitting the ball straight down would place it perfectly into the opponent's court.

After a short time of playing, I actually began to get the hang of it. Pride began to flow out of my body like sweat as I concentrated on playing "my zone." (My zone...sheesh, it was a one square foot area in the middle of the court. My zone...) We actually started to play like a team. Robert would cover the entire court, and I would cover "my zone." It worked well and we actually began to win some games.

I had a new-found confidence and brotherhood with my cousin. Everything was going smoothly, until his brother, David, came over and complimented my new-found playing style. Trying to be humble, I responded with, "It's not me, Robert taught me to..." Just then, David

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exploded. Right there in front of God and everyone, he let me have it. At the top of his lungs he shouted, “Don’t you ever throw a compliment back in my face! When someone gives you a compliment, you say ‘thank you.’ Not ‘it was this or that.’ You say THANK YOU! You don’t have to say anything else. Just say THANK YOU!” And then he stormed off, leaving me a shocked, embarrassed pile of pre-teen meat in the middle of the court.

As life progressed, I thought about that incident from time to time. Not only was he right, but he got the point across in a way that stuck with me forever. Now, whenever someone compliments me on anything, I just say thank you. And do you know what? It works. I may expand on the subject after I say, “Thank you,” but I always say “Thank you” first and make it the most prominent part of my dialogue.

The simple lessons in life are often the hardest to learn, and they sometimes require some sort of shocking event to seat them into our being. For me, it took David’s public attack to get me to say “thank you” and nothing else. For God, getting us to have a relationship with Him, took the murder of an innocent man – His son.

Jesus was tortured and murdered. He knew it was going to happen since before the dawn of time and by allowing it, He accomplished several things. First, His death paid for our sin and made it possible for us to go to heaven when we die. Second, it opened the door to our having a relationship with Him while we are still alive. And third, it provided a huge amount of shock, especially when he rose from the dead after three days, proving that nothing can overcome Him, not even death itself.

Think about how great that is. God loves us so much and wants to be in a relationship with us so badly that He was willing to allow the torture and death of His only Son to get it. We must be really special to Him! I guess that’s why He gives us the beauty of sunrises, sunsets, children’s laughter, and so many other everyday wonders.

## SHOOTING COWS

When we think of what Jesus did for us and continues to do for us every day, I think we need to say “thank you.” Nothing more, just “thank you”....and maybe laugh a little, too.

Love a lot and laugh a lot. It's the best thanks you can give Him.



## FIST FULL OF DOLLARS

**I**T was a lazy weekend and I had a little time on my hands, so I decided to take my son, Matthew, who was two at the time, to the playground. He started getting excited the moment we arrived, and it grew exponentially as we neared the brightly colored slides. Pretty soon he just couldn't take it anymore and broke into the best little run he could muster. It was really a prolonged stumble to a fall, but for his sake, I'll call it a run.

Just as we were stepping into the graveled play area, he froze. I had no idea what could possibly make him stop on a dime like that. (He certainly doesn't do that when I call his name.) Well, it wasn't a dime he stopped on, it was a quarter. *TREASURE!* How he knew what a quarter was at two years old, I'll never know, but he picked it up and held it tightly.

I offered to keep it for him and, defiantly, he said, "No!" I suggested that he put it in a safe place and come back for it after playing. Again, he said, "No!" What else could I do?

He did his best to climb everything in sight but was having a terrible time because he couldn't use the hand which held the quarter. Sure, he was able to do everything he wanted, but it took ten times the energy and he still needed help. Eventually, however, the fun overtook him and he lost track of the quarter, which gave him full use of his hand again. Almost immediately, he was pushing the needle on the fun meter to its breaking point.

I chuckled to myself, as I thought about the struggle, his stubbornness, and the simple solution to it all. Then, WHAM!, it hit me like a ton of bricks. (I suppose it's the whole "wisdom of the children" thing.) He was doing exactly what so many of us do every day. He was holding

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onto money so tightly that he couldn't enjoy the playground to its full potential. We do the same thing. We hold onto money, or other things, with such a tight grip that we don't enjoy life to its fullest. We get in our own way.

What people desire more than anything are peace and fulfillment. The media tells us constantly that the way to achieve peace and fulfillment is to buy things we don't need to impress people we don't like. Once the message is internalized, we enter into a no-holds-barred quest for money and prestige. We think money will buy us peace, and prestige or fame will bring us fulfillment. The only problems with this strategy are that it does not work, and frequently, we sacrifice our morals, self worth and relationships with friends, family and God along the way. The end result is selfishness, which leaves us lonely and restless—the exact opposite of our original goals.

What we need to do is turn to God and see what He says about how to attain peace and fulfillment. The Bible, His instruction manual for life, is full of advice and guidance on these matters. It is not a list of do's and don'ts designed to drain all of the fun out of living. On the contrary, it's a road map of sorts that shows us the shortest path to our desired destination: an intimate relationship with God that brings peace and fulfillment.

Think about it this way. Would you drive across country to an unfamiliar destination without first consulting a map or GPS? Of course you wouldn't, because you want to arrive where you are going safely and quickly. Does the map or GPS take the fun out of the trip because it tells you where to go and how to get there? No, it doesn't. There is still plenty of room for fun and enjoyment during the trip, maybe even more, since there is no need to worry about course or direction.

The Bible is very similar; it is a road map for life. If we follow what God says in it, we will be able to leave worries behind and enjoy living. If we go one step further and let God drive, we will grow close to Him along the way and find the peace and fulfillment which we so badly desire.

Be like Matthew at the playground and get so wrapped up in



enjoying life with God that nothing else matters. When your grip on money and possessions wanes, and your focus turns to God, life will become more enjoyable. Lookout, though, because that just may start an upward spiral of life improving each day. Sure, there are going to be tough times in the future, but you will be able to handle them with God's help. God is trustworthy and good. He'll take good care of your life if you'll only give it to Him.

Love a lot and laugh a lot. It's the best thanks you can give Him.



# ALMOST SHOT THE DOG, A CAT & MY SURFBOARD

**H**OME alone! Just 14 years old and I was home alone – at night. Oh, the fun there was to be had.

My dog, Elvis, and I were getting into the swing of things and having a great time. Suddenly, Elvis turned into a vicious, snarling, attack machine. His aggression, however, was not aimed at me, but someone in the back of the house! The only other time he had acted this violently was when a burglar was breaking into my bedroom. Fear washed over me like Niagara Falls.

I should have called the police and left the house quickly. But what did I do instead? Right! I grabbed a shotgun and followed my dog into battle. Fear, stupidity, and a good dose of machismo were coursing through my veins and clouding my judgment.

Matters intensified when Elvis began growling at the entrance to the darkened cavern we called the garage. I threw open the door and Elvis raced in to attack the intruder. Before I could even find the lights, I heard his snarls leap to a new level of intensity. I flipped the switch and saw Elvis trying to claw his way into a small, interior room. “Oh no!” I thought. “Not that room! I’m dead.”

The room where he had the criminal cornered was the same room where all of the monsters hung out! My brother and I had known that for a fact since we were little tikes. It was not even up for debate. It was the darkest, scariest monster lair a kid had ever encountered.

I summoned courage from somewhere in Idiotsville and kicked open the door. Elvis charged inside as I jumped back and readied my shotgun. He started fighting with someone...or something (after all it

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was the “monster” room). I prepared for a burglar to burst forth and attack me, and after a few tense moments, something exploded from the room. It was a cat with Elvis hot on his heels! Before I realized what was going on, I trained the shotgun on the “burglar” and almost fired. At that particular moment they were running behind my surfboard, and if I would have pulled the trigger, I would have killed a cat, my dog and destroyed my surfboard – all in one shot.

As I contemplated this adventure, one thing jumped out at me: the way I let fear take control of the situation. For a few minutes, I let it completely alter the way I lived my life, and there wasn’t any reason for it. When the object of my fear came racing out of the room, it wasn’t anything like what I expected. It was actually harmless.

There are many people who live every day in the shadows of their fears, and it radically diminishes their enjoyment of life. They are scared to face them because of the possibility of pain and misery. In reality, though, when fears are confronted, they usually turn out to be far less damaging than anticipated.

If you look in the Bible, it says a lot about fear. In fact, whenever an angel appears to someone, the first thing they say is “Fear not” or something similar. It’s almost like their way of saying “hello.” God knows that humans have a propensity to be fearful. And we do...we fear others, ourselves, loneliness, crowds, spiders, heights, and many other things. We are excellent harbingers of fear.

The great thing, though, is that the summation of Jesus’ message is “Believe in Me and I’ll take care of you.” What a relief! He created *everything*, which means He can conquer *anything*, including our fears. We don’t have to be afraid!

When we let go of our fears to the point that we can trust God and risk it all, we will truly love. We will love Him, others, and even ourselves. When that happens, everything falls into place.

Love a lot and laugh a lot. It’s the best thanks you can give Him.

**Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> John 10:30, Gen. 1 (NIV)

<sup>2</sup> Matt. 7:7, Jer. 29:13

<sup>3</sup> John 8:32

<sup>4</sup> Rom. 5:8

<sup>5</sup> Matt. 6:25 - 34

<sup>6</sup> John 15:13

<sup>7</sup> 1 Cor. 9:23 - 27

<sup>8</sup> 1 John 4:18

<sup>9</sup> Heb. 13:5

<sup>10</sup> Jas. 3:8-9

<sup>11</sup> Rom. 8:28

<sup>12</sup> Rom. 8:28