

Michael's Journey to the Cross

Megan Piscitelli became Megan Cooper a few years ago. She and Kevin are perfect examples of young people who went to the same church for several years and one day discovered each other. Their courtship was a commentary on Matthew 6:33, "*But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.*" They were God's love gifts to each other. Then as the years passed they were blessed with a little child named Joseph. Yet through the happiness of the found will of God and with the establishment of a fine young Christian family there was an apparent ache in the heart of Megan for her father, Michael Piscitelli. Megan was not sure his salvation - if anything, she believed the exact opposite. Every Sunday morning in men's prayer meeting Kevin would request prayer for his father-in-law. Mr. Piscitelli was dying of cancer, but holding out without faith with a choleric tenaciousness.

Michael certainly saw first-hand true Christianity. I know Megan and Kevin lived the life in front of him and looked for an opportunity to plant the seed of the Gospel, but it seemed to them they were not making progress. One morning after prayer I said, "Kevin, one day and it may not be long, Michael may want to talk. Maybe he will be willing to talk to me." Last Saturday I received a phone call from Kevin telling me Michael did want to talk to me. I knew this meant only one thing: he was ready to make peace with God. My wife and I had just arrived in Dallas when I received the call. I was scheduled to speak there, and then fly to Virginia to preach the following day. A trace of worry came to my heart as we tentatively made the appointment to have our talk on Wednesday morning at ten o'clock. The Lord gave me the assurance however, that I would be able to talk to him. Thus began the journey to the cross for Michael Piscitelli.

I. It began with longing.

I called Michael and talked on Sunday afternoon from Dallas. We made the appointment and I heard the longing for Christ and the call of the cross in his voice. He was ready. His dear wife, Marilyn expressed that a change had come over him after our initial conversation.

It is so wonderful when the Holy Spirit has arrested someone like Michael. As Michael came nearer his passing, he expressed that he wondered what others would think with his new desire for personal relationship with Christ. After being encouraged by his family not to worry about what others may think, he didn't worry. He continued with his insatiable desire to know Christ and get this settled. "*Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled*" (Matthew 5:6). I do not believe God will let anyone with a sincere heart to know God to live or die without Him. He who puts the hunger in our heart to know God will surely fulfill His and our longing!

II. It was interrupted by a near miss.

On Tuesday, the day before our scheduled encounter, Michael experienced a serious physical setback. He could not even talk until later in the day on Tuesday and immediately began to say, "The pastor's plane gets in at 7:27; he will be here at 10:00 in the morning." He nearly died on Tuesday, but God had miraculously granted Michael a fortitude and resilience that kept him fighting for life. Michael was not going to allow this setback to keep him from Christ and having the promise of meeting his loved ones in heaven.

Our scheduled visit now would not be at his home, but at M. D. Anderson hospital. It became apparent to me as I requested people to pray for me as I traveled back to Houston to share the talk of eternal life with Michael, that we had entered spiritual combat. Later, while talking to the family, I was even more convinced of the spiritual warfare. Reinforcements from below and thank God from above had been called in. It was good at a time like this to remember, "If God be for us, who can be against us?"

III. It regained momentum.

While at M.D. Anderson, Michael received the help he needed, although we did not realize how temporary it would be. On the way down to the hospital, I was amazed at how heavy the traffic was that time of the day. In the twenty-six years I have called at the medical center, I have never had a harder time finding a parking place. Even in the little things, I was aware there was someone beyond our senses who did not want Michael to be saved and yet an even more acute awareness - Someone who did want Michael to be saved. I am compelled to say, it is wonderful at a time like this to be a messenger of God. I could see the behind the scenes, chess-like moves bringing us together. Even cancer became our friend, as it was to Michael - a wake-up call to find his much needed faith. After finally parking in the second garage that was already marked "full," I was sensing the strong momentum. Every step was like a cadence as I marched into the battlefield. And with every step, an increased energy. I was reminded of the story of the prodigal son who came home: *"And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran..."* (Luke 15:20).

IV. It consummated with reality.

When I walked into Michael's room, I felt the strong presence of the Lord. I sensed he was ready and because of the covered mouth and nose from the oxygen mask, the advanced physical toll his disease had taken, and the added medication, I literally got into his face and loudly and hopefully with compassion took Michael to the cross. Knowing Michael had been reared Roman Catholic, I mentioned to Michael my awareness of the stations of the cross. I said, "Michael, we are going beyond the stations, we are going to go to cross for ourselves. We are going beyond receiving communion; we are going beyond the Eucharist. Michael, we are going to the cross and today you may by faith actually receive the person of Christ in your life and heart." I was amazed how at the critical moments his eyes would brighten and he would periodically nod his head in a deep yes when asked, "Do you hear me?" As we looked at the cross, declared Christ's resurrection, I led Michael through what has often been termed "The Sinner's Prayer." Twice he affirmed that he prayed that prayer of repentance and faith. Jesus said, *"Verily, verily I say unto you, he that heareth my word and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life and shall not come into condemnation, but is passed from death unto life"* (John 5:24).

You could sense the joy mixed with a little angst in the room - wondering if dad and husband were aware of the presentation and prayer. God has a wonderful way of giving you the comfort you need at the time. When I told Michael I was going to have to leave, he said to me, "I am privileged to meet..." then his voice trailed off. Surprisingly to all in the room, he pulled his covers back to walk me to the door, as one of the kids said, "Ever the gentleman." Marilyn had to hold him down from getting out of bed. Marilyn later told me he was probably going to say, "It was a privilege to meet with you." The privilege was all mine. For Michael, the greatest privilege was to meet Jesus Christ.

V. It ended at home.

Michael was a very successful and hard workingman. From the family, I picked up on his love of family. He cared deeply for his wife and kids. One of the last reminisces was a longing to have spent more time with his kids. His wife assured me; in this he did his best. Although he was very disappointed in many who called themselves Christians but did not live it, he had a mentor named Tom. This was his father-in-law. Tom helped set a precedent in the generation before him that faith and family were very important. Throughout his thirty-seven years of marriage, he often asked his wife, "What would Tom do?" Although to a great degree Michael got the family part, he never settled the faith issue, until Wednesday at approximately 11:00 am. What would Tom do? Just exactly what Michael did - accept Christ as personal Savior. At 11:30 pm of the same day, Michael breathed his last breath. Now he's home, really home, awaiting the family he loves. In much of the recent conversation with his wife, Michael kept referring to his life as a journey. How thankful we are that in the last intersection of the road of life, he stopped and let Jesus in, not as a passenger but as the pilot, who took

Him home! Michael's journey to the cross ultimately became his journey home to heaven. "*In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you*" John 14:2, 3.

- Pastor Pope -

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