

I'm perfect

*The Imperfect Pastor**

**Discovering joy in
our limitations through
a daily apprenticeship
with Jesus*

by Zack Eswine

Everywhere for All

There is a day, when the road neither comes nor goes,
and the way is not a way but a place.

WENDELL BERRY

It's as obvious as air.

In order to do something, you have to be somewhere.

Yet there's more.

Eventually, you get to where you're going. Have you
thought of that?

It's one thing to do what you need to in order to get
somewhere.

It's quite another to know how to stay put for a while
once you've gotten there.

Searching for Roots

“Zack, your life is like a five-alarm fire. You are coming and going in so many directions. I worry about you.”

Bill’s words shook me as a young man.

One of my bosses echoed the same sentiment ten years later. “You are doing so many different things,” she said. “We want you around here for a long time, so pace yourself, okay?”

Two colleagues invited me to lunch. Another called on the phone. “We are worried about you,” they all said.

Then I received a letter. It was the old-fashioned kind with a stamp on the envelope. I opened it and heard my mom’s voice as I read. She too must have heard the alarm. “Son,” she wrote, “a tree has to have roots to provide shade.”

Mark this down, okay? You and I were never meant to repent for not being everywhere for everybody and all at once. You and I are meant to repent because we’ve tried to be.

Advancing by Limitation

A young woman wrote down everything she would not have if she chose for her life a poet’s vocation. She took

stock of her truer loves and forsook all other possible and imagined lives for the sake of a poet's life.¹

When I became a pastor I made no such list. I never imagined that if I said, "Jesus, take me anywhere and everywhere with you!" that I might have to watch him say yes to others who brought the same request but hear him say no to me instead (Mark 5:19).

It's not because the Bible didn't prepare me for this. The apostle Paul put a list like the poet's in broad daylight for all to see. But I was too busy studying 1 Corinthians 12 or Romans 12 for exams that required my views on tongues, prophecy, apostles, and miracles. I never actually reckoned with the plain and simple message of Paul's words—mainly, that some people have this gift but not that one, and these boundaries reveal God's provision for our good. Paul says that the hand needs the foot, and the eye needs the ear. I would have resisted, supposing that I could become all four!

And never would I have imagined that the calling given to me out of Christ's love might be considered "weaker," "less honorable," or "unpresentable" in comparison to others' (1 Cor. 12:22–26).

On the contrary, when I read in Jesus's story that God gives some of us five talents, some of us two, and some

of us one, naturally I assumed that I had five (Matt. 25:14–30). When I read Jesus’s story about some who produced a crop, one hundred, sixty, or thirty times what was sown, I never imagined that I might be the guy with thirty, living my life in the shadows of my colleagues who produce one hundred (Matt. 13:18–23).

My point is this. If we want to use our gifts, we are required to take a step. But in whatever direction we place our foot, we necessarily leave every other direction empty for the footsteps of another.

So if Jesus had asked me, “What would you like me to do for you?” I would never have responded, “Lord, I desire a vocation that limits me and makes me dependent upon others.” But it’s plain that I’m meant to. “And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers . . .,” Paul says (Eph. 4:11). As a pastor, I may be apostolic, but I’m not an apostle. I’m prophetic, perhaps, but not a prophet. I’m evangelistic but not an evangelist. My vocation, therefore, is not itinerant and mobile like these other three.

I am, in contrast, a pastor teacher. Pastor means “shepherd.” Shepherds are the returning ones. Shepherds remain when the apostle, the prophet, and the evangelist arrive and then move on. Heart-oriented

questions confront us here. What will it mean to our lives to have a vocation of learning how to return? What will it mean to let go of an itinerant life?

Learning how to stay put gives me fits. Rarely in my life have I known people who stay with one another, in families or churches or denominations. How can a broken-homed, upwardly mobile, restless-for-something-larger, more notable-and-now kind of man ever become a pastor?

Jesus.

Learning the Names of Trees

I grew up in the Ohio River Valley, in the lower southeast region of Indiana near Louisville, Kentucky. Many of those towns are named after men—Charlestown, Georgetown, Scottsburg. In Clarksville I learned confidence with football and shyness with girls. In Floyd's Knobs I learned to drive. As a teenager I could drive Buck Creek Road with my eyes closed.

But Henryville is designated as the glue for my life. My name is scribbled in chalk there in a closet underneath the stairs in the house that my papaw built. The Henryville United Methodist Church has had a long,

beautiful, and sometimes tumultuous relationship with my family. Mount Zion Cemetery gives rest to many of my people—those I have known, loved, and miss—and those I’ve only heard stories about. In fact, my mom and my pop, the Guernseys and the Eswines, both have their roots in this small town. My papaw had a mug down at Tanners reserved just for him. He and his longtime friends had named themselves “the liars’ club.” They sat most mornings to enjoy each other’s company before the work of the day began. There are people who live in Henryville who once changed my diaper. I meet them at funerals. Just by looking at me, they tell me that I must be Vern’s son.

It was the demons that first drew my attention to Jesus’s sense of place (I refer, of course, to those demons that the Bible mentions). I’m not accustomed to learning from demons. A man who has little time for the trees on his property will have even less time for unseen spooks. But Mark’s Gospel records a conversation between Jesus and demons. “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?” they hissed. “Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God” (Mark 1:24).

The demons first identified Jesus with Nazareth; and, second, they knew this Jesus as the Holy One from God. I pondered the connection. I rolled it over in my mind. *Jesus of Nazareth is the Holy One of God.* The Holy One of God is *Jesus of Nazareth*. Suddenly the nightlight was turned on. I saw in the room what had before eluded me. If the Holy One of God is *Jesus of Nazareth*, then the Holy One of God has a hometown.² The shade giver has roots.

Jesus was at one place, not every place in the world. He had a home church. He had a family and a trade that was known and sometimes challenged by his community (Luke 4:16–30). If the Ohio River looms ever present in my upbringing, for Jesus it was the River Jordan. I fished and boated in Patoka and Deam Lakes. The lake known as the Sea of Galilee offered shores, waters, and fish for Jesus. He knew the shortcuts and paths in the Galilee region as I knew those particular to the Ohio Valley. The Holy One of God became a man—and this incarnation included limiting himself and inhabiting a locality on the earth.

And while in this place, Jesus knew the names of trees. He built from them what his mind imagined and what his skill learned over time could call forth. Amid

the aromas of freshly cut woods, the bone and blood in Jesus's hands would form an alliance. He would shape and sand long trunks and planks of wood into tables and chairs.

Jesus crafted these barks during what theologians refer to as his "years of obscurity." I think of this when I remember my Papaw and Mamaw visiting my home in St. Louis. They told me in a few minutes what I had not learned in two years—the names of the trees and bushes on my rented property. We walked slowly. I needed to listen, but listening required resting. I struggled with both as Papaw and Mamaw named my place for me.

I'm trying to say how restless this all makes me! I'm puzzled over what Jesus is doing among the wood chips. Aren't you? What is the meaning of this sawdust caught in Jesus's beard and dangling from his smile—and all this tree-bark obscurity for thirty years? Thirty years! Jesus had a world to save, injustice to confront, lepers to touch. Isn't greatness for God squandered by years of obscurity? What business does a savior have learning the names of trees?

Climbing Mountains

In my white-collar pastor world, we plan in order to meet, and we meet in order to plan. “Somewhere else doing something else” is the unspoken motto of our missional advancement. Bigger means holier and better. As one lead pastor said, explaining why he rarely spent time with his staff, “We will have all kinds of time to meet together in heaven. But now we have work to do! We have souls to save and disciples to make.”

This idea seems so foreign to the carpenter in Nazareth. In places like Nazareth or Henryville, advancement to somewhere else doing something else is rare. In contrast to white-collar pastors and people, blue-collar churches learn to testify about what they’ve seen and heard in the ordinary of the day, because the ordinary of the day is the great thing that happened. What one lived that day becomes what one actually talks about that night.

For example, the granddaughter’s smile down at the A&P becomes a fifteen-minute story that draws everyone into belly laughter. The smile was important enough to notice and the story valuable enough to tell. The laughter, the story, and the smile each form

a sufficient agenda for conversation. Nothing more is required to share time together. In my younger years, I found this attention to the mundane lacking. As I became certain of my pastoral vocation, I wanted “real” conversation about “real” life. I wanted us to talk about things that mattered, things that make a difference. Now I’m beginning to reflect more on those feelings. When did it happen that to talk about what one lives is not enough for real conversation? When did it happen that a granddaughter’s smile is not substantial enough to speak of, especially for a pastor given to bear witness to God in a locality?

When George Mallory was once asked why he wanted to climb Mount Everest, he famously answered, “Because it is there.” But in a personal letter to George’s wife, Ruth, he revealed even more about what drove him to climb the mountain. “Dearest,” he wrote, “. . . you must know that the spur to do my best is you and you again. . . . I want more than anything to prove worthy of you.” George left a meaningful legacy that proved worthy of history’s remembrance. But George’s son John wrote something that has challenged me. Proud of his father but sad too, John wrote, “I would so much rather have known my father than to have grown

up in the shadow of a legend, a hero, as some people perceive him to be.”³

The answers George gave concerning his motives have confronted my own. The mountain “was there,” but so was John, George’s son. The mountain brought a sense of joy and gave a sense of the human struggle upward for life itself. But George’s knowing his son would have brought him joy and a sense of striving for the purpose of life too. Climbing the mountain enabled George to prove worthy of his family. But so would have loving and providing for his family in the ordinary routines of a long life, day upon day. So why did George choose to engage the challenges of the mountain but not the living room?

At this point, I am leery, sensing that I have established a false dichotomy between one’s work or dreams and one’s family and routine. After all, there is nothing morally wrong with climbing Mount Everest. George Mallory was a schoolmaster with three children. Though he and Ruth were geographically apart as much as they were together, there is indication that this was not easy on George. So I must refocus the question. Why did George Mallory choose the mountain when he understood that it might take his life?⁴

Why was Mallory's pursuit of joy, the meaning of life, the worthiness of family, and the loyalty to complete a task connected more with climbing a mountain than with the daily routines of love and life, work and play in community at home?

I think of my Lord learning the names of trees in Nazareth.

I hear the Serpent's whisper.

What if, for many of us, the ordinary is the larger mountain?

Learning How to Return

It feels strange to say it. But the Christmas shepherds are providing me texts for pastoral theology. They are skilled in dealing with anticlimax. Remember?

Angels infiltrate the skies right before the shepherds' eyes. The glory of God thunders in chorus. Ancient promises are fulfilled and witnessed. Fear seizes these sheep men. Good tidings are spoken to them. "The Savior is born, and this will be the sign that will confirm it for you." To see and hear angels was spectacular already. Imagine how spectacular the Messiah's sign could be. Perhaps God would reach down his hand and

create a new planet. Then he could hold it between his thumb and index finger and place the planet in its new position in the universe right before their very eyes! Surely this would be a sign worthy of a savior from God!

But here the anticlimax begins. No planets were formed. “You will find a baby,” they said, “wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” The sign of God’s fame lay in the aroma of cattle and hay—the placenta of new birth, the cries and warmth of ordinary life.

No stately form that we should know him
There was no halo on his head
No trumpets blowing
No majestic fanfare
He was born where animals are fed.

To these ordinary shepherders, God has revealed glorious and fantastic wonders! And now, the second anticlimax confronts us. According to the Gospel of Luke, after beholding and participating in this too-grand-for-words event, “the shepherds returned” (Luke 2:20). They returned? This fact confounds me. After beholding the glory, the shepherds went home.

Same Old, Same Old

How could this happen? They were shepherds, men who worked with their hands. The aroma of animal and outdoor living took up residence in their skin. These were blue-collar workers, salt-of-the-earth kinds of folks. They understood what it meant to work the late shift. “By night,” Luke says, they watched their flocks (Luke 2:8). *Watching*, make no mistake, is an adrenaline word. Shepherding meant keeping their eyes open when most in their community were closed. Years of this kind of labor creates a complaint in one’s joints and bones. Add to this the scorn and jokes that were leveled against the shepherding way of life, and my restless question seems all the more valid. Why didn’t the shepherds go on the road?

With all that they had seen, they could have started a conference series, planned a book tour, and instantly gained thousands of blog followers. Doing the same thing in the same place for the rest of their lives was their lot and their legacy. They could have changed all that. The celebrity moment had found them. Greatness is too worthy a thing to demean by returning to the ordinary of life!

But right here, God in his grace disrupts us. By means of the shepherds returning, God seems to seriously imply that seeing God's glory, hearing his voice, receiving his good news, and beholding his love was never meant to deliver us from ordinary life and love in a place—it was meant instead to provide the means to preserve us there.

Pause here. Don't rush past what I just said.

Celebrity opportunity does not remove the arrangements for neighbor love that still exist. Someone will still need to care for the sheep, create clothes for others, provide milk and food for neighbors. And even if the shepherds did get on a tour bus and travel around together, their call to love each other and their neighbors, to eat, to wash clothes, to seek and give forgiveness from each other in ordinary moments, to attend to sickness, to celebrate birthdays, and to seek God would not go away.

Every addict knows this. The glorious moment provided by the drug does not remove the ordinary call of life. That is the problem. The high doesn't last. We crash, and our loved ones are still there, longing to do ordinary life together and pained that it is being taken from them.

Every hero knows this. The man who kicks the goal that wins the World Cup knows that tomorrow night or next season he has to start again—another game is coming. He also still has to learn how to listen to his wife and cherish her, to resist exasperating his kids, to learn how to give his heart authentically to God and to receive God's love and wisdom for his life. The fireman who saves the life, the CEO who saves the day financially, the mother who saves the day for a child—the heaven-like moment thrills and celebrates. But it isn't heaven.

For the shepherds "to return" expresses the wisdom of God. We return to the same old, same old, but we are changed and empowered to dwell there relishing what we've witnessed of his grace.

But someone will say, "That's a nice sentiment, but social media allows me to be everywhere at once. Pastors are no longer limited."

All I can tell you is that my book had won an award. Those who heard my radio interview were greatly helped and let me know it. But I gave that interview red-eyed and in my pajamas from a retreat house in the woods of Missouri. I was broken down. I could never have spoken in person that way, and if I had tried, I

would have had to do a great deal of pretending. My point is that no matter how far technology allows our gifts to travel, we ourselves, the persons that we actually are, remain rooted to one place at one time.

I tweet you, with my particular rump seated on this particular chair, on this old and slow laptop in this room. I am not everywhere at once. I am only here—one place at a time. In the fullness of Jesus's humanity, so was he. In order to follow Jesus we have to go through a carpenter's shop in Nazareth.

Going Somewhere by Staying Put

Several times I've spoken with pastors who crave to leave their present place and calling, not rightly, because of burnout or safety for themselves or their family, but because of the limits and boredom or hard work they feel amid the rough terrain of the same old, same old. Remaining put while other colleagues seem to advance and move up to more exciting and seemingly influential ministry callings, amid a culture that praises them and overlooks us, only intensifies the restlessness. So these pastors have applied to other callings, but no doors have opened for them to leave. For

purposes only God knows, the one who governs providence has in mind for them to stay longer than they'd like. In my own restlessness I've sometimes turned not only to the Christmas shepherds for mentoring but also to the exiles in Jeremiah 29. First, I do so to remind myself that, in comparison to these ancestors of the faith, having to stay put where I am isn't the level of suffering I might sometimes and mistakenly imagine that it is. Second, it is to learn what it means to follow God in a place I desire to leave.

In Jeremiah 29, two different kinds of preachers are giving sermons to exiles. The one is Jeremiah. Jeremiah speaks from God. He tells the exiles that they will have to reimagine life where they are. They aren't going anywhere else for seventy years. This means that all but the babies born at the time will have passed away and finished their lives. The babies will have lived most of their lives by the time a chance to go back "home" arrives. This message is hard to take.

Another group of preachers is saying the opposite. "Don't put down roots!" they are saying. "God wouldn't keep you in exile like this!" "He is going to get you out of here!" "Dream, fidget, pack; this place is temporary; get ready to move!"

Which church would you prefer to attend if you were in exile? I think I'd prefer not to listen to Jeremiah, too. In fact, all of my life a verse from this passage has been quoted to cast a vision for my future and yours. "For I know the plans I have for you," says the Lord, "plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope" (Jer. 29:11).

What I failed to realize as I take up this wonderful promise is that almost everyone who originally heard it knew that they would never experience its fulfillment in Jerusalem, where they wanted to be. They had to grapple instead with the truth that the future and the hope for them with God would take place right where they were in exile—where they would live and die. Their great-grandchildren would experience the fullness of the future and the hope back in Jerusalem. The next generation would get to move, but not them. What does it mean for us if the future and the hope that God has for our welfare means that we will have to trust him right where we are?

They want to leave, but God will be with them in the city where they are. Each day they will look afresh to God in order to cultivate a place to live, do their work, love, marry, cultivate a family heritage, and actually

seek the welfare of the city they want to leave as they cultivate a life of prayer within it (Jer. 29:5–7).

This means that God will be with them to sustain them and to teach them what it means to walk with him amid obstacles they'd rather not contend with.

- *Limits.* They will have a life in which they cannot be everywhere in general and nowhere in particular. Not only will they learn to decide what they will do, but they will have to come to terms with what they will not do.
- *Ambitions.* They will learn how to reorient their ambitions to the welfare of God's glory among their neighbors, in the ordinary of life, for the good of their place.
- *Frustrations.* They will have to bear with imperfections, annoyances, dislikes, and hardships.
- *Emotions.* They will learn that what makes us glad, sad, mad, or frightened cannot easily be solved solely by geographic movement.

- *Critical spirit.* They will be tempted to connect the dots of everything that is wrong. They will learn gratitude in this place.
- *Sufferings.* They will have to be in the same place as people who have hurt them or whom they have hurt or gossiped about. They will learn savvy and healing in this place.
- *Time and measurements of progress.* Seventy years (they will learn patience in this place).

Exulting in Monotony

But how do we return day by day to congregations and situations we feel restless to leave?

To return to this community is to hurt. How do I return to forgive or to endure narratives about me among some?

There are places that bore me here. When I see them, I feel that I already have. How do I return into boredom?

There are thoughts, emotions, and histories here. When I hear them, I'm overwhelmed. How do I return to what I cannot fix?

There is beauty here, and hope; the longing for redemption, and purpose. How do I return without overlooking these gifts because of my hurt, my boredom, and my inability?

Such questions start arguments with me. Then I look out my window into Webster Groves or Henryville or wherever we are. “The Lord is my shepherd,” we can say. “My shepherd is a returning one. He returns here too. He takes me by the hand or carries me into the day, again and again and again. He returns, and we find hope in his company here. He is teaching us to “exult in monotony.” Not all at once, but over time.

Because children have abounding vitality . . . they always say, “Do it again”; and the grown-up person does it again until he is nearly dead. For grown-up people are not strong enough to exult in monotony. But perhaps God is strong enough to exult in monotony. It is possible that God says every morning, “Do it again” to the sun; and every evening, “Do it again” to the moon. It may not be automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike; it may be that God makes every daisy separately, but has never got tired of making them.⁵

I am slowly beginning to picture those Christmas shepherds as if years later they sat around the fire in the cool of a late evening—children and grandchildren staring into the crackle and flicker with drowsy eyes and ready for bed.

Glory had not delivered them from the daily grind. It had not delivered them from Herod killing every two-year-old male, or Roman occupation, or a corrupt church that would in the end yell, “Crucify!” Seeing the glory did not deliver them from this.

And yet an aged shepherd stokes the embers and says, “Did your old grandpa ever tell you about the time the angels—” Suddenly a chorus of grandchildren interrupts. Rolling their eyes, they moan, “Yes, Papa, we’ve heard that story before, many times!”

The old shepherd stokes the burning bark. He pauses and looks up and into their young eyes. His smile only broadens. “Let me tell you again,” he’ll say. And as the young ones moan, tired from this exulting in the same old thing, the aged man demonstrates his absence of fatigue. With awe and memory in his voice, and an ache in his back from the long day, he begins to retell the history. “It was an ordinary night, and we were watching our flocks,” he says.

And so an exaltation amid the monotony rises. Worship, hope, and testimony refuse to quit. As he speaks, the old man is looking at the daisies again, and the same old, same old is bringing life to his routine. For a moment, I feel his joy among the sheep. His kids will grow up and wonder. Something larger than this worn tent and long days had put a fire in Gramps's heart and life into his eyes. It is almost as if he had some news, as if God were with him, here among the sheep pens on this unforgiving hillside, unknown by the world but known by God.

Coming Full Circle

A statement from old Samuel Rutherford has become a companion of mine. Confined to one place by the authorities of his day because of his faith, he wrote letters.

The Great Master Gardener, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, in a wonderful providence with his own hand, planted me here, where by his grace, in this part of his vineyard, I grow; and here I will abide till the great master of the vineyard think fit to transplant me.⁶

I spoke about such things to Mamaw before she died. We sat in old chairs, in Henryville.

“For a long time I’ve been trying to get away from here,” I said. “Now it seems I’m sad for the distance and the absence.”

“Well,” she said, looking through the walls like they were windows, “sounds like you’ve come full circle.”

That is what roots require of a person who is nowhere in particular. He must first come full circle and there find the grace to say “Do it again” to the mundane beauties around him. We must learn to tell old stories in familiar places among a people we grow thoroughly to know. We must believe that this is enough to give life meaning. How can we learn how to do this returning work except through him who knew the names of trees? He who called you to where you are declares that you needn’t repent of being in one place at one time. You needn’t repent of doing only a long, small work in an extraordinary but unknown place. Standing long in one place for a while allows the roots to deepen. It allows pastors to become pastors. Slowly the shade grows and a life gives. It is Jesus *of Nazareth* who walks with you.

Fix It All

I have seen a man on the bank of the river buried up to his knees in mud and some men came to give him a hand to help him out, but they pushed him further in up to his neck.

BENEDICT WARD

Pastors are returning ones.

Sometimes we return to ashes, the tearing of clothes.

Sometimes we return to growls and teeth murderous within the shadows of torches.

We clench our fists. We target our sword for the enemy's ear.

"Put down your blade," says the master surrounded by wolves.

No wonder we want to run.

Broken Porches

There she lay on the front porch, curled up in a ball, barefoot and in pajamas, leaning fetal into the aluminum screen door. Her crying mom kept the door shut, having been urged by her husband to keep Lori out. Exasperated, the dad was trying force to fix the situation with “tough love.” As for me, two other elders and I had been walking the streets of the neighborhood searching for Lori. “She had run away again” is all we knew. Our search ended on the front porch. There Lori lay, locked out in her tears, and there we stood in ours.

Somehow I had not imagined that ministry in Jesus’s name would mean that my life would be lived among such porches. I’m not sure why. A shepherd carries out his work among the weak, the sick, the injured, the straying, and the lost (Ezek. 34:4–5). A shepherd, in contrast to a hired hand, learns to do life among wolves, because this is what sheep do. He cares for them in these dangers (John 10:12–13). In his book *Strong at the Broken Places*, Richard Cohen puts it plainly: “We the injured are everywhere.”^{[1](#)}

I also had no idea that shepherds can try to avoid days of injury in order to promote their own safety and

advancement. If a shepherd's aversion to broken things, his impatience with this kind of intrusion into his day, gets challenged, he can become forceful and harsh even with his flock (Ezek. 34:4).

But I now understand the injury and the attempt to control it, even if by harsh means. There on porches of everywhere injury, we can feel out of control and are sorely tempted to strive for something like omnipotence—the possession of unlimited and immediate power. “When [Eve] saw that the tree was good . . . , she took of its fruit” (Gen. 3:6).

So on broken porches there is little wonder that the Serpent's pledge would glitter and shine into preference. “You will be like God,” the Serpent promised (Gen. 3:5). “You will not surely die,” the Serpent hissed (v. 4). As a pastor, I want this kind of promise on the porch, and if I'm not careful, I will take of its cursed fruit. I can be god on the porch for them. I can fix them. “All is not this bad,” I can tell them. “You will surely not die,” I will say. “I will make this go away for you.” Anything I can grab and eat or say or quote will do, anything to make me feel like I'm doing something constructive amid my helplessness. I scratch and claw to be omnipotent on

the porch. I try to use strategies other than the gospel to fix all the broken things. All of us do.

Multiplying Words

Amid the injury we sometimes keep saying, “You’re not supposed to do that.” When preaching about David’s sin, for example, my tendency was to say, “See what he did? Now don’t you do that.” But the problem was, of course, that David did sin already and so had many of those listening to me at the moment. So then what? Likewise, when in personal pastoral care, what can you say there on the porch as you stand with your Bible? We can say, “Don’t be here!” “You shouldn’t do this!” all we’d like. The problem is that everyone already is and already has. Now what? Is there any gospel hope?

Impatient for an answer and a remedy, we begin to multiply words. Consequently, someone like Job not only has to endure all that ails him; he must also deal with the flurry of texts, e-mails, letters, and phone calls of those trying to fix him in God’s name.

Proverbs reminds us to look out our windows and to listen to what the real world can sound like (Prov. 7:6–23). The sights and sounds can be tragic, such as in a

living room of a ministry coordinator and her husband. It is not a porch, but the damage remains.

“I’m not a Christian anymore!” he yells to her.

“You don’t have to follow Jesus for us to remain married and find a good life,” she responds. “I’m yours; I’m committed to you. We can get counseling. We can ask for help,” she assures him.

“I’m not going to counseling together, and I’m not going to ask for help, especially from God,” he declares. “I’m tired of the hypocrisy of churches. I hate this life,” he retorts.

“I’ll resign tomorrow,” she pleads. “I don’t have to be in ministry. Where do you want to go? We can go anywhere and start over,” she begs. “I love you,” she says.

“But I don’t love you, and I never have,” he retorts. “I don’t want to be with you. I never have.”

She is silent. Her words begin to falter. Maybe as you listen in, your words begin to fail you too.

“For me this marriage ended ten years ago,” he reveals.

“You don’t mean that,” she mutters. “I can’t believe that is true,” she mumbles. You notice that she almost says the next words to herself rather than to him.

“What about our kids, our memories, our life together over these years?”

“I need some air,” he says and gets up from the couch. “I’m done with this.”

At that moment, when her words fail, you watch her do something she has never done in fifteen years of marriage.

What does a baseball pitcher do when the other team hits his best pitch? Where does the “little engine that could” turn when she faces a mountain larger than all the others and too steep to overcome? What happens when the little engine can’t? Having no answer, seeing him walk away, wordless to stop him, she stands up, grabs him, and tries physically to block his way. He moves one way, and so does she. Words dissolve into the force of will.

“I’m not letting you go!” she shouts.

“Let me through!” he yells and begins to push.

Conscience calls to her. She lets him through but then gives in to multiplying words again. She follows him in a chase down the hall, through the living room to the front door.

“Leave me alone!” he yells and then slams the door behind him.

“I’m not leaving you!” she bellows through the door.

“That’s just it!” he shouts as he walks to the car. “I’m leaving you!”

Throwing Bible Words About

In the days that follow, you watch as friends, family members, and church folks multiply words. “You’ve let your looks go. You just need to get pretty and he will notice you more,” another says to her.

Now the Bible words get multiplied. “He just needs to know what the Bible says and do it,” one minister says to her. We can be tempted to hurl verses at other people almost as an incantation. We sometimes act as though there is power in speaking the words themselves, like a wizard reciting her spells. Get the words spoken correctly and the spell works. Misspeak the syllables and the spell won’t work.

But the presence of things we cannot control or immediately fix reminds us that though the Bible is God’s revelation, it in itself is not his magic remedy. It lights our path by his Spirit, but it cannot always shield us from what he shows us there. Only the Christ that the Bible verses reveal can do this.

Mark this down, won't you? One of the first signs that we are approaching the borders of attempting omnipotence is this: we believe that another is choosing a course of action because he or she simply isn't clear on what is right. Therefore, we believe that if we just work hard enough to explain what is right, then he or she will obviously and immediately do the right thing. No one was more plain, true, reasonable, and clear than Jesus, and they crucified him. Clarity matters a great deal. But clarity can't always solve or fix the broken things.

Imagine what the porch that morning would have become if we had believed that the best hope for that girl, her mom, and her dad amid the ruins was our formula of words, our multiplied pontifications choking out the space, the ache, and the silence? Job's friends got it right when they sat silent with him in the ashes. The damage began when they spoke. Jesus will sit in the ashes on the broken porches of our lives and teach us how to trust him more than our multiplied words.

Raising Our Voices and Pointing Our Fingers

As words fail to solve the problem, those involved start to get louder and target character. Job was not above needing correction and growth. But the character attacks made by Job's friends were misguided and cruel.

Fix-it-alls begin to think something like this: *This situation or person couldn't possibly be what it appears to be. We have quoted the Bible and made our arguments. Things should be fixed by now. There must be some hidden mischief here. We need to speak some more, but this time, louder and more accusatory.* When this happens, we become like one who talks louder to a blind person or raises his voice at a foreigner who speaks a different language.

So now imagine again the situation of the director of ministry. Perhaps some men and women become red-faced finger pointers and call her a hypocrite. They maneuver to find some hidden debauchery in her life, tidbits and morsels for conversations and prayers.

She warrants blame. She needs more growth and change than she knows. But her sins in this case, you see, are not of the talk-show variety. She has no gossip-magazine scandal hidden in her closets. Her sins and limits do not justify her husband's leaving. Yet a community of Jesus, behind closed doors, is tempted

to whisper dark speculations in meetings opened with prayer. So sometimes the porch isn't enough. There must be dirt beneath it. Impatient with unfixed things, we fill the space with speed of thought and speculation. We create foul scenarios and speak them.

"Did you have an affair?" someone asks her. "Are you a nag? Are you misusing the kids? What did you do to cause him to leave and to wreck your ministry?"

It is easier for us to handle an illness when it has a clear name and a precise cause. Sitting in the doctor's office amid undiagnosed days of "I don't know" is much more difficult. We hate the feelings that come with unfixable and uncontrollable moments. We do not know how to do a day with unfixed feelings, so we flail about and knock the dishes off the counters instead. At least we are exerting our power, we justify. We feel like we are doing something.

Writing a long, prosaic treatise e-mail punctuated by words placed in ALL CAPS might feel empowering too. But in the end this has as little power as reasoned words to fix what ails us. Imagine how we would have handled the porch that morning if we had believed that ALL CAPS treatises would untrouble and control it? Imagine if we had projected onto the girl, the mom,

and the dad worse things than were actually there and therefore filled that already wrecked porch with the addition of our pointing fingers?

Fear and Intimidation

We can then begin to practice fear and intimidation as a leadership or pastoral care strategy. We can begin to yell, threaten, verbally or physically cajole, or even silent-treatment those on the porch.

The problem is that fear and intimidation work as long as gospel healing isn't our goal. I remember a ministry leader who was struggling with a personal crisis. An elder was charged with this ministry leader's care and formed an official delegation to meet with the ministry leader "to learn how they could pastorally care for him." Even though pastoral care formed the stated goal, the meeting collapsed into an interrogation, which ended with accusations and harsh words on everyone's part. The elder shared with me that he felt so sorry about that situation as he looked back on it. He said he had given in to the pressure of knowing that others involved were going to ask him very tough questions. So he had to make sure that nothing was left

unturned in order to appease them. With their examination of him in his mind, he actually pointed at the man needing care and, with red-faced intensity, called him a hypocrite. I know this temptation well. Most of us in ministry do. Seeking someone's approval in our imagination or in reality, rather than Jesus's gospel, we get tripped up.

The point, of course, is that fear, intimidation, and threat will not fix a girl with anorexia in a fetal position on the porch while her mother and father avalanche with anxiety.

Pause here, won't you? Reread that last sentence.

Defensiveness

Defensiveness doesn't help us either. My defensiveness has come mostly in the form of emotional blasts—with tears, pleadings, and strong statements. Others defend by calm record keeping. Record keepers defend themselves in the way that I imagine the clergy in the good Samaritan story might have. Theirs was not a sin of commission—something they did. Theirs was the sin of omission—something they did not do. Leaving the broken man beaten by the side of the road, they could

have easily defended themselves. They could have readily shown that they had done all their duty that day and never drawn attention to the beaten man. After all, his presence did not fall into their normal responsibilities. If someone did discover the broken man, the record keeper could have shown that they did nothing wrong to the man and justified why they respectively handled him the way they did.

The first kind of defensiveness, emotional blasting, is easy to see and makes others squirm to retake control. The second kind, record keeping, functions to keep everyone more comfortable, more apparently in control with detailed defense, so our ability to recognize this gospel substitute takes much longer.

Either way, defensiveness only proves the point of our brokenness and exaggerates our faults in the eyes of others, particularly if those others already see what they want to be true about us rather than what actually is true about us. Defensiveness has no power to heal.

I sit for a while with a friend. "Anger does not bring about the kingdom of God," he gently says to me. We sit in the silence sipping tea. We sit in the ashes and wait together. We wait for Jesus. Gradually, he gives the stamina to be quiet when slandered, silent when

gossiped about, entrusting our reputations more and more to him and less and less to our words, emotions, or record keeping.

You were never meant to repent because you can't fix everything. You are meant to repent because you've tried. Even if we could be god for people and fix it all, the fact remains that Jesus often does not have the kind of fixing in mind that you and I want.

The Inconsolable Things

You cannot fix "the inconsolable things." The inconsolable things are identified first by the "cannots" of Jesus's teaching. For example, no matter who we are, "no one can serve two masters," no one (Matt. 6:24). Even if we are wise and knowledgeable by his grace, there are still things and seasons in our lives that we "cannot bear . . . now" (John 16:12). No matter how strong of a will a person has, "the branch cannot bear fruit by itself" (John 15:4). No matter how many oaths we take or how much we spin words into boast, we "cannot make one hair white or black," Jesus says (Matt. 5:36).

These cannots from Jesus teach us that sickness, death, poverty, and the sin that bores into and infests the human being will not be removed on the basis of any human effort, no matter how strong, godly, or wise that effort is. This is why Jesus teaches us that the faith of a mustard seed can move a mountain and “nothing will be impossible for you” (Matt. 17:20). So we bring faith to what troubles us. And according to Jesus it would seem that there is nothing in the world we can’t fix if we just have the smallest seed of faith. But this is not the conclusion Jesus draws for us. Though nothing will be impossible for us with faith, “you always have the poor with you,” Jesus says (Matt. 26:11). The paradox emerges. When it comes to poverty, there is no knockout punch or decision in your favor. You must step into the ring with faith, knowing that you will not win in the way you want to.

We also have no power to produce the increasing things. By “increasing things,” I mean the fruit that we by our ministries hope to produce. Don’t get me wrong. We can do meaningful pastoral work among the mattering things, but only God can give the increase (1 Cor. 3:6–7). Jesus teaches us that the power to give salvation is inconsolable as it relates to us. We cannot give people

the new birth with God (John 3:3–5). We cannot justify someone, make her righteous, sanctify her, give her adoption, convict her of sin, or change her heart (Luke 19:27; 1 Cor. 12:3). There is nothing we can do in ministry that does not require God to act, if true fruit is to be produced (John 15:5). Everything pastors hope will take place in a person's life with God remains outside the pastor's own power.

We also cannot fix the absence of peace the way people often want us to. Why? Because Jesus gives peace but not the way the world does (John 14:27).

I met Steve years earlier at my first Bible study at Grand Village Retirement Home. He was the only one who attended my first day. I was nervous and pushed to say a prayer to end the meeting quickly. But this Purple Heart recipient had other ideas on his mind. “Father, I’ve not been to church in over fifty years,” he said to me. I was not Catholic, but I was a “Father” to this ninety-year-old. “God could never forgive me for all the things I’ve done,” he said, as he stared past me into a world that pained him. That day, grace gave me words to speak of Jesus and his forgiveness. Jesus drew Steve to himself.

Now, here Steve was in the hospital. His hands were tied down because he kept tearing the tubes out of his arms. He was caught in a hallucinatory world. He told me to watch out for the postman standing at the edge of his bed waiting to do me harm. I assured Steve that I was okay. I told Steve that I loved him. He gave no indication that he heard me. He was fidgety and groaning in the world he was imagining. I sat for a long while. I sang. I prayed. All the while Steve didn't recognize me. Then, as I was leaving, I leaned over and said, "I love you, Steve."

Steve shot me a look. The fidget, the moans, and the illusions collapsed from his eyes. For a moment he saw me clearly. "I heard ya the first time!" he declared. Then for an instant more, we looked at each other and saw each other. Then the moment left, and his turmoil returned. Yet love asserted itself there amid the hallucinations, the tied hands, and the fading mind. There is a kind of peace that Jesus gives. It goes where other kinds of power will not. It does what other kinds of power cannot.

His power is found when singing "Amazing Grace" to a woman in hospice, wheezing in the dark for breath. Singing of his grace makes the lungs relax, and the

breathing eases. Death will not stop. Inconsolable things will not quit, not yet, not for a while longer. But grace has come. Something more powerful than death hums softly alongside her and holds her hands.

We cannot do everything that needs to be done, which means that Jesus will teach us to live with the things we can neither control nor fix. We will want to resist Jesus and act as if we are omnipotent, but we will harm others and ourselves when we try. Others will also resist Jesus. Using his name, they will praise or critique us, promote or overlook us, according to their desire that we fix everything for them and that we do it immediately. But they will have to learn too that only Jesus can fix everything and that there are some things Jesus leaves unfixed for his glory.

This feels excruciating at times. We enter situations every day knowing that we have no control and that our only true hope in which we place our confident faith is that God will do in this awkward silence what he alone can do according to his ability and love. No wonder we hurry about trying to fix it all. It is so much less humiliating to move about, speak words, make plans, and hurry into action than to wait for a while longer and see; or to fall to the floor, tear our clothes,

and enter the weeping with people. But to enter the weeping with people is what Jesus leads us to. Waiting and seeing what God will do is no waste of time.

Our Winsome Harming

King Herod would not agree with this kind of power. His strategies for solving problems made problems go away but healed nothing (Matt. 2:18). King Herod was no “wounded healer.”²

Perhaps we are nicer than King Herod. The fact is, when we strive to fix it all apart from Jesus, even nice ministry leaders can become winsome harmers. We join a long line.

- Job’s friends, lacking sincere empathy, thought they knew more than they did. In their hands, doctrine excused ignorance. Correctness justified a cruel word. Truth, we learn from them, can be used unfeelingly and foolishly. Truth can be used to hurt people. The mandate to speak truth with love mutated into “I’ll tell it like it is.”
- The shepherds of Ezekiel 33 used ministry to manipulate people in order to gain status, comfort, and

reputation. They left the broken, the lost, and the harassed to the wolves.

- The elder brother of the prodigal son represented the Pharisees (Luke 15:11–32). These Bible teachers justified ingratitude and bitterness in the name of standing for righteousness. They gracelessly pounded people with religious virtues.
- The religious leaders in the good Samaritan story (Luke 10:25–37) had no concept of love for neighbor when they were “off duty.”
- In fact, for any of us in the vocation of ministry, it is sobering to realize that the harshest things Jesus ever said (like the prophets who foreshadowed Jesus) were for the ministry leaders of his day (Matt. 23:1–36).

Peruse the heroes of our faith, and the temptation for genuine leaders to winsomely harm others and offend God is no less prominent.

- We know about Noah’s drunken debacle as well as his courage and faith.

- We rightly honor Abraham's faith, while rightly remembering the fact that selfish fear could get the best of him.
- Moses murdered. He shrank back. His temper squandered his opportunity to physically step into the Promised Land. Yet he also believed and courageously led.
- We sing the psalms of a man after God's own heart. But this man also did terrible deeds and at times made tragic choices far beneath his calling and the grace given him.
- Jonah raised his fists at grace.
- James and John wanted to call down fire and consume those who disregarded Jesus.
- Paul teaches us. But God made sure that we receive Paul's teaching and integrity while knowing Saul of Tarsus's bitter story.
- Peter exalts Christ for us. But we are not gullible regarding the kind of cowardly sin that Peter exemplified when Jesus was arrested.

Somehow I thought the contours of my life and ministry would look distant from these biblical leaders and heroes. I thought that I would not make their mistakes or share their vulnerabilities. But standing on that porch, I am a broken pot and without any superhero cape. We're all broken, earthen vessels on that porch—the mom behind the door, the dad on the phone, the two elders with me, and the girl piled in the ruins.

We would get Lori up off that porch that day, go on into our normal routines of chores, food, prayer, Bible reading, music lessons for our kids, and sleeping. But the thing that brought Lori to the porch in the first place would remain unrepaired that night and for many, many nights to come. Each of us, therefore, would have to learn how to live each day with each other and none of it or us fixed.

Mounting an Offense

In her remarkable memoir regarding her ongoing battle with chronic rheumatoid arthritis, Mary Felstiner asks: “How can a soul rise to the occasion of illness?”³ By “illness,” Mary meant the diseased wrecking of one’s body into disrepair. By inquiring how a soul rises to

this occasion, she meant choosing and learning to live stubbornly, vibrantly, and lovingly onward within the carnage that once was her fingers or legs.

Her disease is a sadist to joints and bones. It pulverizes them with a grin. It wrenches them out and yanks at them. It twists them into a mangle while chuckling. So when I hear her call us to “rise to the occasion,” I recognize that she intends to fight. But her way of fighting startles me. “At least now I know what the job is,” she says. “Mount an offense when no match is mine to win.”⁴

This past year I received a letter from one of the elders who had stood with me on that porch that morning those years ago. I learned from the letter that Lori’s life, all these years later, had healing in it. What he described regarding the grace that found her and holds her still, amazed me into tears.

How did Jesus’s peace calm her life? To be honest, I’m not fully sure. No large, notable, efficient, and speedy answer is available. The only things that we could muster were small, overlooked things over a long period of time. One of the elders wrote an e-mail once a week to Lori throughout her trauma. Every Monday it simply

began, “Good morning.” In it he spoke of the beauty he saw in her and the grace of Jesus that he prayed for her.

Another elder allowed Lori to live with his family for a while as her family sought grace to make it through. There was some counseling. There were lots of tears and setbacks. Psalms were cried and poured out.

A lot of time went by, years of unfixed days with no seeming answers or remedies. So how did the healing come amid such inconsolable things? How will Jesus continue on with her amid the inconsolable things that are still hers to navigate?

I can’t really say. In fact, as I think back to that porch all I know for sure is this: the match wasn’t ours to win. It was his. And he did.

Know It All

Anyone who thinks that he has understood the divine scriptures or any part of them, but cannot by his understanding build up this love of God and neighbor, has not yet succeeded in understanding them.

AUGUSTINE

I had just given Eric his first Bible. He had only prayed in Jesus four or five times during his life (and this in the last two days!).

An elder had stopped by to pick up something for Sunday school class. “Hey, Jason!” I said to the elder.^{[1](#)} “I’d like you to meet Eric, a new Christian. We are meeting for the first time today. I just gave Eric his first Bible.”

The elder shook the new convert's hand and said hello. What he said next stunned me. "So, Eric," he said. "What is your opinion of Westminster Larger Catechism Question 109?"

Eric smiled blankly and looked at me.

I remember that long-ago moment. I look at it like a mirror that warns me and raises a question. How do we get to the place where we forget that there was a time that we too didn't know what the Gospel of John was, much less how to find it in the Bible or how to read it when we did? What is it about how we Christians sometimes view growth in knowledge that enables us to belittle or demean or judge or confound or overwhelm a person who is opening his first Bible for the first time? The haunting answer is that the Serpent's temptation still whispers to us: "You will be like God, *knowing . . .*" (Gen. 3:5).

We are tempted to something like omniscience—the ability to know everything. But you were never meant to repent because you don't know it all. You are meant to repent because you've tried.

Apprentices

In his *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, Goethe writes about a master who leaves his young student in charge. Ambitious, the young apprentice surmises that he is ready to fill his master's shoes because he has "memorized what to say and do."² Those familiar with the famed Disney version of this poem will likely remember the frenzy and damage that results. Though he tried to imitate the tasks of his master, he neither embodied the ways of his master nor understood the depth of the powers that confronted him. Therefore, all his efforts only worsened his plight until finally he humbled himself, begged the master's return, and received in surrender the master's gracious and powerful rescue.

The poet's point is obvious. Trying to access the power of a vocation by mere memory and incantation will shortly make a mess of things.

The Bible agrees. Several itinerant preachers had watched the apostle Paul cast out demons and perform miracles in Jesus. They took stock of themselves and surmised that they could likewise do what Paul had done. So when they happened upon such evil spirits, these preachers mimicked what they had observed in Paul.

“I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul proclaims,” one of them cried out. To which the demon retorted, “Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?” Immediately, the preachers who tried to practice what they had memorized but not embodied were overpowered and fled the scene naked and wounded (Acts 19:11–16).

The demon was astute. It recognized that no matter how much the preachers’ words and actions resembled those of Jesus, the quality of Jesus’s authority, life, and teaching was absent.

We too can misuse knowledge in this way. In my first days of seminary we students of an intensive Greek class gathered for a break each day to pray for one another. Not many days into this daily routine of gathering for prayer beneath the shade of a summer tree, an upperclassman walked boldly toward us and rebuked us:

Brothers, I warn you! You are obviously proud and stubborn. It is obvious you want the rest of us to see how spiritual and holy you are. I know. I too was once a new student like yourselves. I too wanted to show off to everyone like you do now. But I was wrong and so are you! Jesus calls us to “go to our closets” to

pray. You call yourselves future pastors? You need to repent!

If there was light for our path from the goodness of the Scripture our brother quoted, we had a hard time seeing it. His use of “light” made us squint our eyes. If there was something beautiful and redemptive about who he had been when he first started seminary, we couldn’t see by the light he was trying to offer us.

We objected, “Are we justified in passionately rebuking people without discerning whether they know any better or as if they have nothing to learn to help them grow? Is Jesus against anyone ever praying in front of someone else? Didn’t Jesus pray in front of his disciples and in the presence of others?”

For all of our mutual knowledge of the Bible, I don’t think we apprentices helped each other to see very much at all that day. A flashlight shone directly into someone’s eyes makes seeing harder, not easier. A flashlight misused can actually rob us of the light it is meant to provide.

Puffing Up

Knowledge meant to help us often only puffs us up (1 Cor. 8:1–2), and misuse of zeal is no different. In America, potato-chip bags are puffed up. But when the bag is opened, it deflates. What looked like a full bag of chips was actually a bag filled mostly with air. As genuine believers in Jesus we are susceptible to becoming puffed up and full of hot air in these ways (among others), especially pastors.

Our zeal with our newness to the faith can exaggerate our knowledge and puff us up (1 Tim. 3:6).

Our zeal for theological controversy, debate, and discussion to demonstrate our superior intellect or persuasive ability over others puffs us up too (1 Tim. 6:4).

Dr. Well-Known Preacher was a helpful pastor who sometimes passionately preached with a prophetic edge about suffering for the gospel. There was for a few years a contingency of students who fashioned themselves as his disciples. They listened to his sermons, read his books, and attended his conferences (though to my knowledge none of them knew Dr. Well-Known Preacher personally except for a handshake at a conference). With red-faced passion, they preached in Bible class about suffering. They sought to lead more ascetic lives on their seminary campus. But by adopting just

one aspect of their celebrity mentor's message without the context and personal experience of his years of pastoral travail for people, they actually hurt fellow students, misjudged professors, and strongly criticized both, and this in the name of God.

They seemed blind to the fact that for all their zeal, they had actually only preached four sermons in their lives. They glossed over the fact that they had never served a day as a pastor in a church. They dismissed the truth that what they had learned only yesterday in class, the professor teaching them had been seeking to live out in life and ministry before they were even born.

Jonathan Edwards noted, "There is nothing that belongs to Christian experience that is more liable to a corrupt mixture than zeal."³ It is not that we desire less zeal. On the contrary, a life and ministry devoid of earnestness is like a heater that sits in a damp room on a cold day but does not work. We plug it in, all goose bump and tremble, frigid toes needing to be warmed, but no help comes. Thank the Lord for zealous young men and women!

But a fire can't safely warm us unless it is the proper distance from us. Get too close in the name of warmth,

and we get burned. Our zeal is meant to be derived “according to knowledge” (Rom. 10:2).

When Jesus gives his “Woe!” to those who misuse the key of knowledge, Jesus highlights the signs we exhibit when knowledge has gone wrong.

Our Bible knowledge leaves us illiterate in terms of the interior workings of our souls (Luke 11:37–40).

The schooling we gain leaves us ignorant of actual love for God (Luke 11:42–44).

For all our scholarship and erudition we remain unpracticed with neighbor love, humility, wisdom, and the deeds that truly honor God (Luke 11:45–51).

We are intelligent with Bible passages but without know-how in terms of the sense or meaning of these passages as they are in Jesus. In fact, Jesus tells Bible handlers elsewhere that they know the Bible but not the one to whom the Bible points (John 5:39).

Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge. You did not enter yourselves, and you hindered those who were entering. (Luke 11:52)

According to Jesus, when it came to describing the door of God, such Bible teachers were accredited door

experts. They spent their days gathering people to look at this door, to painstakingly memorize every line, crack, corner, color, and carving. And yet, according to Jesus, these Bible teachers and their congregations possessed an expert knowledge of a door they could not open. Ironically and tragically, by their knowledge they actually made inoperable the very key that they themselves proposed to know all about. A wise old pastor was right: “It is possible for us to develop a false notion of knowledge.”⁴

We may attend a local Bible study for years. We may finish a seminary degree or fulfill one year in a local-church apprentice program. But this does not mean that one is able to illumine rather than blind, to warm rather than scorch.

Knowing in Sorts

I gave up on the moon once. It was early evening. The clouds had taken the night off. Commanding center stage, the moon confidently lit up the dark hemisphere. The kids and I watched the performance through our van windows.

“What do you think, Caleb?” I asked. “What do you think of that moon?”

Caleb is my youngest. He looked intently into the sky. The moonlight reached through the window and lightly touched his left cheek. Then little Caleb surprised us all.

“Broke, Daddy,” he said.

With sudden urgency, he thrust his arm and pointed with his finger out the window. “The moon broken,” he clarified.

I looked again through the window up at center stage. “Oh, Caleb,” I explained. “The moon isn’t broken. It’s a crescent moon.”

Caleb did not understand the word *crescent*, but it sounded monster-like. His face fell with seriousness. With furrowed brows he pleaded with me, “Daddy, fix it!”

We all laughed out loud. “Daddy can’t fix the moon, buddy,” I chuckled. “It’s too far away and too big.” Caleb looked out the window again and then back at me.

Without hesitation Caleb looked hard at me and said, “Daddy, go there. Daddy, go there and fix moon!”

As my eyes met the expectation in his, I was confounded. I had identified the moon as “crescent” and

stopped further observation. But Caleb wasn't satisfied with my explanation of *the sort* of moon it was. The luminary was shadowed, and little Caleb was trying to account for the shadow. What I called "crescent," Caleb called "broken." He wanted it to be made well again.

The way I saw the moon, named its kind, and dismissed further attention from it (in contrast to how Caleb looked beyond its sort to the moon itself) exposes another problem with knowing.

If this man were a prophet, *he would have known who and what sort* of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner. (Luke 7:39)

It is not that knowing in sorts is wrong in itself. This Pharisee correctly identified the sort this woman was according to the Bible (Prov. 7:1–21). Jesus likewise had this knowledge. He too rightly identified the woman as a sinner (Luke 7:48). As it related to the sort of woman she was, the teacher and the pupil were agreed.

But take note. Because we are right on one thing never means that we are right about everything or even about what matters most.

True repentance is happening right in front of this Pharisee, and he does not account for it (v. 48). He either does not have a category for repentance that equals his category for sin, or he does but has no experience with applying it.

For all his God-knowledge, this man's relational treatment of Jesus is profoundly impoverished (vv. 44–46). He either does not have an equally palpable category for personal hospitality, or he does but cannot or will not apply it.

This woman is seeking forgiveness right in front of him, and he cannot see it (vv. 41–43). Either he does not have a robust way of sorting out forgiveness, or he does but is blind to his inability to put it into practice.

True love for God and neighbor is happening right in front of him, and he despises it while remaining blind to his own absence from it (v. 47). Either he does not have a solid category for sorting out what true love for God and neighbor is, or he does but has little of it in his own being.

The Purpose of Knowing

And what but love in Christ forges the purpose of our knowledge anyway (Matt. 22:38–39)? The elder had knowledge of the Westminster Larger Catechism. The upperclassman had knowledge of Jesus's words regarding prayer in secret. I had knowledge in six-week Greek class. But each of us struggled to relate soundly (i.e., with a resemblance of Jesus's love) to the people in front of us. The Scriptures in Jesus lead us toward "an epistemology of love, a way of knowing that is manifest in loving."⁵

So, anyone who thinks that he has understood the divine scriptures or any part of them, but cannot by his understanding build up this love of God and neighbor, has not yet succeeded in understanding them.⁶

Over the years I've derived these questions for my Bible reading and preaching as a vaccine against this knowledge in sorts that puffs up and heats up but misses what Jesus intends.

- What does this passage show me about the loveliness of God? Or, put another way, what is it about God in this passage that calls for my love for him?

- What does this passage show me about people and about what love requires of me on their behalf?
- As one who has been shown mercy and love from God, what empowerment from him do I need to overcome my obstacles to love? What about the love of God in Jesus gives me hope and provision for my own lovelessness?

Then, if something that I read seems anything but lovely or loving, I write it down, step back, and keep in mind the lovely things that I have clearly seen on other Bible pages. Without letting go of these lovely things I ask about the text that seems unlovely to me. I begin a dialogue with the Father in Jesus about the loveliness he sees there, and in community conversation, I trust that he will show me in time by his Spirit what he sees.

Gracious Time and Time and More Time Again

Another help against our temptation to know in all the wrong ways is Jesus's way with Peter. When you look at Peter's life, when would you say that Peter "arrived," "got it," or "knew it all"?

He walks on water but worries about the storm and sinks. Yet Jesus does not act as if Peter has no faith. He acknowledges that Peter's faith is real, but "little." Jesus then invites Peter into a dialogue for learning. "Why did you doubt?" The tone isn't harsh. The rebuke isn't demeaning. The relationship isn't over. Falling short and trying are part of the training (Matt. 14:29–33).

Then Peter wrongly tries to stop Jesus from washing his feet (John 13:6–8), but this is no sin (John 13:6–8). Jesus tells us so. Jesus has room for Peter to encounter things he has no category for and has yet to learn. It is okay to say to Jesus, we don't understand (Matt. 15:15).

Then Peter declares, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:16). At that moment we think to ourselves, *Surely, Peter has now arrived!*

But immediately after this, we learn from Peter that a genuine profession of faith in Jesus does not dismiss remaining folly from our lives. "Get behind me, Satan!" are our Lord's words for Peter's boneheaded desire to keep Jesus from the cross (Matt. 16:23). Yet even these harsh words did not separate Jesus from Peter. Jesus did not cast him out or treat him as anything other than his true friend, follower, and brother.

Still, Peter's follies continue to abound. He declares that his faith is superior and his commitment strong (Matt. 26:33–35). He has no idea how terribly he has overestimated himself or how spiritually charged with satanic attack are his circumstances. If not for the intercession of Jesus, Peter along with the others would have been sifted like wheat (Luke 22:31). And yet Peter keeps falling asleep when Jesus asks him to watch and pray (Mark 14:37).

Then, Peter cuts off the ear of Malchus and receives Jesus's rebuke (John 18:10–11). Peter denies Jesus with cussing and blaspheming. The rooster crows, and he weeps bitterly (Mark 16:66–72). And yet Jesus pursues him, loves him, and keeps him (Mark 16:7).

Peter hurts and feels stung by Jesus's words, and yet these very words are restoring him (John 21:15–19). Even after the resurrection, Peter hides in fear after seeing the empty tomb (John 20:10, 19–22) and later requires Paul's rebuke because of how fear got the best of him again (Gal. 2:11–14).

And yet for all this mistake making, folly, and sin, what Peter needed was gracious room to grow. Peter is neither Caiaphas nor Pontius Pilate, neither Herod nor the Pharisee who in his home judged both Jesus and

the sinful woman. Jesus saw mistakes, errors, and sins in Peter. This did not count Peter out and did not mean that he deserved the same response from Jesus as these others warranted.

A question or two surfaces for us to mull over: How do you handle it when other people get things wrong? Does anyone you serve have room to make a mistake? What does it mean that as a pastor, you too need the time and time and time again of Jesus's grace?

Impatient Knowledge

Over the years, in the family of American evangelicalism to which I belong, it's been the rare environment of grace in which mistakes and sins are differentiated and in which the time needed to grow in relation to both is granted.

Imagine "Rev. Famous Author." For a long while, he has written of the gospel of Jesus truly and helpfully to many. But in his latest book or blog post Rev. Famous Author, while trying to account for the gospel in our culture, seems to go askew on a fundamental teaching. This is a genuine problem.

Apollos had this problem too. The gifted preacher of Jesus needed the gracious provision of Priscilla and Aquila to learn. They heard him preach. They gave thanks for it. They grew from it. But they at the same time invited him for dinner. They taught him things privately. They asked challenging questions personally (Acts 18:24–28). Apollos was given room to grow. His good teaching was not made void just because he got some things wrong.

We are often less patient. We take on late-night banter, blogging attacks, and tweeting daggers as if the culture, rather than Jesus, is our master. So Dr. Well-Known Preacher and Mr. National Blogger immediately and publicly castigate Rev. Famous Author and relationally disassociate from him.

Then Long-Established Scholar and Dr. Conference Speaker offer an all-or-nothing response that acts as if, by making one error, Rev. Famous Author is all and only error. This sounds more like how Jesus dealt with the Pharisees than how Jesus dealt with Peter or how Jesus had Apollos dealt with. At minimum, wisdom teaches us that time is needed to determine which posture of heart the erring brother is coming from.

I'm trying to say that there is something about our way of knowing that struggles to uphold two truths at the same time: (1) Rev. Famous Author is making a fundamental error by this aspect of his teaching; (2) Rev. Famous Author loves Jesus, has followed him faithfully for years, has helped the faithful, and needs our company and civil conversation in order to have a shot at growing. (Maybe by this kind of company and familial dialogue we might learn something too?)

I've carried the subtle idea around with me that growing in knowledge will mean that I get to depend less and control more. But Jesus indicates the opposite. The humble knows the most and knows it not.

The Know-It-All Pastor at Home

Imagine what it is like to live with your pastor if he is a know-it-all. His use of God knowledge puffs him up, and he eye-blinds you with sorting and face-scorches you with zeal. For all his Bible zeal you can't remember the last time you knew what it felt like to be understood, cherished, known, or deeply loved.

Often you've been corrected, even gently and reasonably told why you and not he got it wrong again.

You can't remember the last time he kissed you with the humble dignity of saying to you: "I'm sorry. I was wrong; you were right."

We fear humble desires.

We resist being creaturely and human.

We forget who we once were and how it was that Jesus loved us and walked with us before we knew so much, even back then, when so much of what we knew was off.

Gradually a young seminary student suspects his wife's immaturity because she does not know or act in a certain theological way, even though he himself had never heard of this way until that afternoon in a class.

A pastor impatiently demands his children to know, believe, and do what it took him twenty-five or forty-five years with Jesus to know, believe, and do. How is it that his own life of mistake making has hardened rather than softened his compassion, when he himself has needed so much grace?

Conclusion

Someone will hear me saying, "Right! We don't need Bible knowledge; we just need Jesus!"

But I'm not saying this. Such a sentiment is itself a way of knowing. It is rarely wise to suggest that we can know Jesus without at least some scraps of what his words reveal to us about him.

Instead, I am trying to talk about knowing according to what Jesus says that knowing is. Our pastoral work needs this mentoring. He is the returning one, the Good Shepherd. He knows his sheep—including that woman sorted out by the Bible teacher. But in what way does he know her? He knows her by name. He calls to her, goes before her, leads her out. He is her doorway to green pastures and rest. He is with her in the midst of her troubles, needs, vulnerabilities, and dignities. He lays down his life for her (John 10:2–4). She is known in such a way that she has learned to know something too—his voice, his ways, to follow. Our hope is not that we know everything but that our Shepherd does.

“Partial Knowledge” is the name of the street on which each of us must have an address and build our lives (1 Cor. 13:12). Therefore, start each day with this admission: regarding every person, bit of creation, and circumstance that I encounter today, I must say to God, “I am in the dark,” and, “I’ve been mentored to distort what sits before my eyes.” I must remember that when

I enter the pulpit, stand by a hospital bed, take a walk, or sit in my chair to counsel another, I physically see people and things always as one at dusk.

Jehoshaphat's prayer becomes ours. "We do not know what to do [Lord], but our eyes are on you" (2 Chron. 20:12).

We receive Paul's prayer and ask it afresh:

That you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think. (Eph. 3:17–20)

Immediacy

I think the besetting sin of pastors, maybe especially evangelical pastors, is impatience.

EUGENE PETERSON

I recently attended a regional meeting of pastors in which they learned that 80 percent of the churches they had started over the previous ten years had not lasted. Eight out of ten pastors spoke once of dreams, God's work, and difference-making in our generation. They prayed and hoped and spent. Everyone cheered, planned, and prayed. But soon after, many returned home bandaged among the wounded.

Conversely, a few churches not only start well but they grow numerically and fast. These few churches catch on so quickly that their crowds create a buzz in

the community. Pastors have to hire more help and immediately. Folks have to develop more programs and speedily. They have to scramble and race about just to keep up with the rush of people hurrying into “the new place to be in town.” After a little while the leadership is exhausted, and the structures that haste required aren’t suitable for caring for people over the long haul. No roots exist. The tree is top-heavy. Restructuring and repositioning have to take place or else the burned-out leaders and volunteers of the church will collapse. They have to slow down in order to keep going, but they don’t know how; they never learned.

Similarly, my friend on the phone was in his third year. He was exhausted, showing signs of wear.

“I can slow down later,” he said. “If I slow down now, what will happen to the ministry?”

“But if you *don’t* slow down now, what will happen to the ministry?” I asked. “If you stay at your current pace, what you fear could likely happen anyway.”

...

I share these three stories as one who remembers the dizzy spells that signified my own imminent fall. They

knocked my head and spun my vision at the oddest moments. I was a lead pastor with a young family and a growing church and pursuing a PhD all at the same time. Doctors ran tests in order to detect inner ear or brain malfunctions. After months, nothing surfaced. A doctor finally asked me the question. “Is there any stress in your life?”

I think back about that now and laugh. I shake my head. Any stress? If my body was a tree, my roots were struggling to hold their ground. I was beginning to sway even on days of sky blue with no wind. Sometimes circumstances will force us to reckon with the necessity of patience for our pastoral work. We will have to surrender to the mentoring of the Spirit in his kind of fruit, or we will crash instead headlong onto the ground, dead roots exposed to the world.

What makes slowing down so difficult? It is our cravings for something other than fame-shy work, our everywhere for all, know-it-all, fix-it-all attempts to replace God, and our prayerlessness, which leaves us burdened with a load only God is meant to carry. Yes, but circumstances don’t often help us much either.

Why People Leave

People ordinarily leave a church with a new pastor for one of two reasons (and often within the first two to three years of the new pastor's arrival): (1) the new pastor is not enough like the previous pastor and things are changing too much; or (2) the new pastor is too much like the previous pastor and things are not changing enough. Groups gather and talk to one another about which side they take. They reinforce their displeasure.

But other negative factors can also collide and conspire to increase these pressures.

For us, it was an economic recession that sandstormed the country. Many not-for-profits and churches were suffering. We were no exception. The elders and I were initiating conversations with pastoral staff about the possible implications for all of our jobs. Late-night meetings were becoming the norm for our leadership. We had looked at printed pages with numbered facts. We had examined taut budgets that would budge no further. We had prayed for leaving people whom we loved and prayed for staying people who were worn out. In time, we might have to make harder

decisions that would impact others on our team, and we were staring wordlessly at each other.

It didn't help that I had started part-time. Our plan was that I would ease in as full-time pastor gradually over two years. This idea was noble, but it didn't work. When someone called me on Wednesday at 3:00 p.m. asking immediately to see me, I'd say, "I can call you tonight on the phone or tomorrow afternoon. If those times don't work, I can see you on Friday." The person felt offended. It was strange for them and for me, I guess, this strangeness of having to wait. They felt uncared for. I felt guilty. When immediacy is our norm, sometimes having to wait for a phone call three hours from now makes us feel overlooked. We complain.

I was preaching out of pain too, pain from many things. Years later, we've belly laughed with tears about my dirge of an Easter sermon early on. I had explored death, darkness, and pain so thoroughly and miserably for twenty minutes that by the time I tried to point us to the resurrection, no one could see it. We laugh now in the grace of memory—the humbling patience of friends who stuck it out together. But it required a lot of people who had little patience for it.

Besides all this we had ironically offered a vision of patience too quickly. Going the long haul together in community felt foreign, not to mention boring. Seeing a congregation as a people with whom to do life rather than a product to mobilize, or seeing a pastor as someone to love rather than to consume for an experience, was new to most of us.

When all was said and done, 150 people left our church in three years. One hundred-fifty thousand dollars of our budget went with them. We had to let three full-time staff go. We gave several months of lead time and severance. But we all hurt. We questioned ourselves. We became the talked-about church in the community. But the talk wasn't hopeful and was often unkind. This isn't easy to overcome—not by sprinting. On the contrary, the impatient mind-set of trying to do large things famously and immediately partially torpedoed us. We almost sank. Almost.

We were asking with earnest tears and humiliated hearts an important question among the mattering things: “Lord, please teach us to follow you into what it looks like to recover this sinking ship.”

The Attraction of Haste

To begin, we had to become teachable to what pastoral work actually requires. Eugene Peterson finishes the quote that I noted above in this way:

I think the besetting sin of pastors, maybe especially evangelical pastors, is impatience. We have a goal. We have a mission. We're going to save the world. We're going to evangelize everybody, and we're going to do all this good stuff and fill our churches. This is wonderful. All the goals are right. But this is slow, slow work, this soul work, . . . and we get impatient and start taking shortcuts.¹

“Walk,” we say to my toddler son, who wants to run with his buddies beside the public pool. I tell him to slow down not because I want him to miss his mark but exactly because slowness is his best shot of actually hitting it.

So maybe we can describe *haste* as “feeling late” or “thinking we have to run.” Wherever we are, it is like we are itching to leave. We have somewhere we are supposed to be, but where we are is never that place. So we constantly feel we are missing out, losing our chance,

or forfeiting what we could have had if we could just get there before the hourglass sand empties out. In our case, we first had to assess why we thought we were missing out.

1) To begin with, *haste is part of the air we breathe*. Even though the word *slow* in the Bible is most often used to describe the good character of God, *slow* to most of us equals waste or disrespect.

2) *Our particular church's past*. Our church had been popular once, that is, prior to our split. We were up-and-coming in the community, and the talk was on the rise about what God was doing among us. The prayers of the people who left the comfort of a home church to start this new gospel work were being answered. But then a devastating fracture between good people ransacked much of that. So when I came, there was a palpable longing to gain back what had been lost. But by then, I was the fourth lead in six years. In my first months, five marriages broke, two groups of folks slandered and ruined relationships, and a house group imploded in a thoroughly damaging way. We were now asking ourselves hard questions and making confessions. If our popularity was truly synonymous with health, how is it that our internal relationships car-

eened so readily into division and fracture? A longing for immediate revival and return can tempt us to say no to patience and yes to shortcuts.

3) *We were not far from the “successful” church in town.* Down the road from us is a church that grew fast and large. Its resources are spread now throughout the city. Some thought we were on our way to being like this church. Others were saddened by how many of our folks had left to go there. Others were miffed or made insecure by how it feels to be like a small, locally owned store in the presence of a giant chain store and trying to compete as the chain store builds more and more stores around ours. Though most churches in America are not this size nor grow this fast, the rest of us are tempted to believe that their story, and not ours, is the gospel norm in the world. Measuring ourselves by the church down the road can tempt us to believe that we have fallen behind and are passed over. We start to speed up, measuring ourselves by their calling rather than ours.

4) *I was considered the real deal.* Looking back, we are humbled by the hype about me, too. The previous pastor was my friend. Our heartbeat was the same. In our community, I was a medium-sized fish in a small pond. “Dr. Eswine” had come. We all expected that great

things would follow. Maybe the celebrity mind-set that infects our larger culture was tripping us up. The presence of a touted leader can tempt us to overlook what ordinary patience in pastoral work requires, no matter who we are.

5) *Our heart for the gospel exceeded our skills with the gospel.* This church is remarkable. It did what few others would. It called a single dad with care of his three children to be its pastor. Trying to back out of the search process, I had said, “I do not know how to be a single dad and a pastor at the same time.” They answered, “Neither do we, but we will learn together.” I will talk more about this later. But for now, it is enough to say that we were like missionaries overseas who, one year in, wonder what they were ever thinking. What the commitment actually required of all of us to love each other was more real and tangible than the grace we had dreamed of giving. Take note of this: trying to transition from a missional vision statement of neighbor love to actual neighbor love can tempt us to quit into impatience and shortcuts.

We had to find a paradigm of a different kind.

Our Marathon Need

“Let us *run with endurance*,” the apostle says about “the race that is set before us” (Heb. 12:1).

A marathon is a creature that chews up those who attempt to attack it with an all-out bolt. Marathon runners also talk about “hitting the wall.” Between the twentieth and twenty-third mile, legs buckle. Lungs burn. The reasons to justify quitting multiply. Cheering crowds no longer provide the inspirational fuel that they provided at earlier mile markers.

This experience does not lead marathon runners to stop running marathons or to yell with fright at anyone who says they’d like to try it, “Go away! At mile twenty-three you will want to lay down and die! Why run at all?” Instead, knowing about the wall fuels education, preparation, and training. Rather than run from it, they run toward it, having trained for what to do when it comes.

In contrast, when pastors hit walls in their first three years or at year fourteen or at year twenty, they wonder if they are called into ministry at all, as if something unique and unexpected is happening to them. When relationships, marriages, parents, new jobs, or small

groups at church hit walls, their first thought is that something is wrong. They made a mistake. They need to quit.

What if, instead, we learned to name the walls ahead of time and to talk about the pace required not only to face them but to endure them, to outlast them, and to go strongly on toward the gospel finish line of our callings?

Forgetting our own marathon need, we felt the kind of stress a church planter feels in his first two years, or the stress a young pastor experiences in a rural church, or the stress a pastor with large potential and expectations senses. “I’ve served for two years, and we still have only twenty-five people,” he says to himself. “Am I even called? Is God working at all? Should I move on to another place? Did I make a mistake in coming here?”

Our circumstances were different from that, but the underlying belief was the same. Because reality was smaller, slower, painful, imperfect, uncomfortable, and seemingly ordinary, we were asking, “Why? What happened? Are we doing something wrong?” So were those who left early.

We had actually staffed ahead of the curve. And this is where immediacy was our coach. By “the curve,” we

meant the numerical growth that was coming. Looking back now, we were asking ourselves, Why had we assumed the coming of a curve? Why did we feel we needed one? And why had we assumed that if it came, it would come fast?

The apostle Paul offers texts of marathon for our pastoral work. Pastors are like soldiers who endure suffering, athletes whose way of life competes according to what the rules of the race require; farmers, working hard, among the soils, weathers, and seasons. Then Paul commends us to “think over” what he says (see 2 Tim. 2:3–7). The meditating pastor must necessarily slow down too.

No wonder, as Paul sees it, we need a stamina for going long distances Christianly as we relate to friend and critic, storm and sunshine, bombast and calm. Pastors are long-distance grace runners. Congregations provide the route their marathons will take.

Patience as a Pastoral Virtue

This pastoral paradigm was bringing us face-to-face with an old joke in Christian circles. “Pray for anything except patience,” the joke suggests. “You don’t want to

see what God will give you if you ask for that. Praying for patience is dangerous.”

I’ve laughed and told this joke. Now I think the joke is on me. I never realized how the joke mistakenly presumes that one can follow Jesus without patience. It also assumes that God will not bother with patience in our lives unless we ask for it. I have been wrong on both counts. One assumption in the joke is true: patience is often learned within the context of trial. The trials seem like interruptions to our otherwise good lives. But more often than not, the trials become the dogs that bark at the impatience and haste that are trying to sneak into the halls of our lives. We wouldn’t see the intruder lurking to harm us without such barking. And impatience does harm to us. In God’s eyes, it will do more harm to us than our trials do (James 1:2–4).

We experienced relational pain amid the torrent of friends who left for different churches. We also spent hours in late-night and lunchtime discussions making decisions in our fatigue. How could we sort out the difference between friend and foe amid this swirl of complaint, pain, and freefall?

Paul apprenticed Timothy and Silvanus in this work, and we found his help.

We urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, *be patient with them all*. See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone. (1 Thess. 5:14–15)

“Make sure it is the idle and not the fainthearted whom you admonish. Be clear it is the fainthearted and not the idle whom you are encouraging,” Paul says. And then Paul reveals what this congregational work of discernment and care will require. “Whether a person is idle, fainthearted, or in need of help, whether you are admonishing someone or encouraging her, be certain of this,” Paul said. “Be patient with them all.”

But how do we show patience in the midst of mean accusation or mischaracterizations? Paul answered. Even when someone does them evil, he exhorts them to wait out their legitimate emotions rather than spew them. They are to bear with their deep wound.

In our day, that would equate to waiting two or three days before responding to the e-mail and holding back the fury in an immediate voice mail. They (and we) are to find perspective and healing from a source other than the temporary gratification from rushing to repay

the evil done to them. They are to wait out their racing thoughts and emotions until they can choose good, even for an enemy. Then this wrestling toward praise, prayer, and gratitude without ceasing for every circumstance they face, and seeking in it what is from God's Spirit (and letting go of what is not)—this reveals the pathway patience takes (1 Thess. 5:16–22).

The Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, *patiently enduring evil*, correcting his opponents with gentleness. (2 Tim. 2:24–25)

Resisting the illusory desire for immediate defense, immediate remedy, and immediate relief is not easy pastorally. A patient gentleness requires courage and strength. For example, an e-mail is seductive bait for a quarrel. I noticed that I had not seen a dear family at church for a while. I contacted the family to inquire about how they were doing. I received an e-mail from the man in response. I hadn't seen the family because they had left our church. The e-mail reads like this:

In short, despite the many good experiences we had at Riverside, and the people we really appre-

ciated, we decided to try to find a church more suited to what we realized we need. Basically, we are looking for a church where the gospel is presented a lot; where doctrine is embraced and taught, where whole passages of the Bible are presented each Sunday. I don't fault Riverside for being the church that it is. It is a church going in the same direction that a LOT of American churches seem to be going. I trust that it is very effective for many people.

Just so you know, we haven't found anywhere that fits us yet. It's getting very frustrating, and we have even considered (shudder!) trying to start a small home-church. I feel totally unequipped to do that. The thing is, though, I know several others (men in particular, and none from Riverside) who are equally frustrated with the modern American church and who have all talked about starting one ourselves. Not that we have the time, and of course none of us are preachers.

An e-mail like this—especially during a week or a season of multiple critiques—challenges us. Hearing that one does not present the gospel a lot, teach doctrine, or highlight the Bible, and that along with most churches

we have more of sociology and therapy than we do the gospel, is tough. It can feel like a punch in the stomach that knocks the wind out, particularly when we know ourselves to pursue the gospel overtly and biblically in all we are attempting to do. Such criticism is made even more difficult when, in the context of friendship, the sender never mentions such things.

In addition, flaws or intentions to grow are given no room. When perfection to the desired standard isn't met, a person leaves rather than joining in to help. Finally, to slip away without conversation and isolate oneself is disconcerting to a pastor. We are tempted to take this as a personal statement about our identity. But my rushing to defend, to (un)kindly instruct, or to try to immediately fix is likely unwise and will prove unhelpful. A waiting of some kind will be required. Sometimes the waiting will last. No resolution will come until Jesus does.

All this having to wait during the invisible of the week can also seep into our preaching if we are not careful.

Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, *with complete patience* and teaching. (2 Tim. 4:2)

We have to resist the naïve or manipulative assumption that just because we preached or said something to someone once, they should hereafter immediately, always, and forever get it right. That's impatient preaching. Impatient preaching enables the listener to avoid wrestling with a question; it expects the listener to always ask, feel, or think the right way immediately; it presumes that growing in Jesus does not require days, weeks, months, and years.

What Paul teaches pastors about their work of patience, Jesus also taught. Those who make it through devilish assaults (Luke 8:11–12), the trials of the world (Luke 8:13), and misguided desires of the flesh (Luke 8:14) will require patience in Jesus to do so.

As for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and *bear fruit with patience*. (Luke 8:15)

We Will Have to Help Each Other

I had no ability to do this or be this. I needed help, and the help came.

A hurricane has an eye within its center where the calm dwells. Amid the worst moments of our swirling windstorms at our church, it slowly became apparent to me that in the center of it all, our core families and leaders were holding firm. Their friends were leaving. But they were not. I was not the only one holding on trying to gain stamina for a race I didn't want to run. So were they. Absent this core commitment to go the distance together, we would not have made it. When the storm hits, it helps to assess who is in the eye of it all and around what they are united. In this case, it was our common hope of what Jesus could still do in our church for this community.

After my black plague of an Easter sermon, Joe asked me if we could have lunch. We talked about our families, each other, Jesus, our church. At the end he said something small but huge: "Zack, I respect who you are as a man, a dad, and our pastor. I'm in this with you. We are doing this together. I've noticed a small thing, and I wonder if you'd give some time to think about it."

“Yes,” I said. “Anything. Of course.”

“You know how in music you have major chords and minor chords?”

I nodded.

“Lately, I’ve noticed that you’ve been emphasizing the minor chords in your preaching. Don’t get me wrong. We need grace in the minor chords. I don’t know how I’d even be standing right now if I was you. You inspire me. But maybe there is a major chord or two that you could play more often than you currently are. I think that might help you and help us too. Would you mind thinking about that?”

I did think about that. This elder gave me grace words of commitment and help. While many stormed about, windblown and frantic regarding the sermon and other things, he just spoke to me from the eye of it all. I’ll never forget it.

What Paul said about Titus comes to mind: “Our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted at every turn—fighting without and fear within. But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus” (2 Cor. 7:5–6).

Paul and his team felt bodily fatigue, internal fear, and external conflict in a local place. The comfort came

in the smallest, almost overlooked way, mainly by spending bits of time with a friend. We the downcast can no longer afford to enter these marathons alone.

In fact, when I think back about all that we had seen in my first four years, I became most amazed by the strength of this church's core group. They had had four leadership changes in six years. They left the stability of a larger, established church for the discomfort of believing that Jesus would empower a new gospel effort in this part of town for his glory. They were still here, waiting. How could that be? I began to think to myself, *What if they were the truly honorable ones? What if their faith amid these days of small things revealed that they were the true spiritual success stories in our community?*

I admired and learned from the patience of this core group. I have needed to learn patience with those who drifted. And all of us have required patience with me. I had tasted a kind of betrayal, including the sting of evangelicals who aren't at their best when they smell a scandal on you. I'd been scared of people, particularly church people, in a way that was uncomfortably new. The emotional abrasions from such a massive critique of my life and ministry had led me twice to offer my resignation. Early on, the constant vulnerability as a

single dad seemed too much. My eventual dating and remarriage as a pastor in the public eye was sometimes cruel. But these elders, they kept saying that they believed God was at work. “Be patient,” they’d say. “Hang on.”

One night I shared my fears with my elders. Tears and fears flowed embarrassingly free. “Zack,” Ty said, “if the worst ever happened, and this church we love folded, we will be standing here with you, the last to turn out the lights. We are with you and hope you will be with us even if it comes to that.”

There is a strange sweetness that can be found amid the answerless ache of an impending threat, going for days without what you know would be easier if you just had it already answered in your hands. Patience says to your empty hands, “God is here.” Patience looks the worst in the face and says, “God will not leave you.”

Patience Takes Time

I am trying to say that God speaks this “unleaving” to us in the smallest, almost overlooked ways. Often in Titus-like presence and sentences, these are the gifts sent from God, whispering amid the rattle and clang.

I was sitting with my pastor friend at a local coffee shop that I frequent in Webster Groves. He is a Kiwi—meaning that he is from New Zealand. I am a Hoosier—meaning that I’m from Indiana (except here in Missouri where the word *Hoosier* means something akin to good-for-nothing).

I sipped my coffee and began to pile on the self-pity as I connected dot after dot of discouraging themes. In time I would need to resist and undo this negative dot connecting. I also would need to lead our congregation through its own need to do the same, to finally come out from underneath old and fading narratives that no longer accounted for who we were becoming and the good work that God had done among us. But that would all come later.

For now, my Kiwi friend simply listened kindly and quietly as I spiraled down into self-absorption, pain, and complaint. He is a man who pastors in places where gospel churches are sometimes so few that there isn’t a church down the street for pastors or congregants to go to instead. Sometimes pastors must work other jobs just to pay the rent. Inhabiting that context, he shows a kind and wise restraint toward my large, notable, and

now assumptions regarding all that I imagine should have happened by now.

“Zack,” he risked. “You know your belief in doing small things slowly over a long while?”

“Yes,” I nodded.

Then he paused. “That’s going to take some time,” he said.

I stared at him.

We lingered.

He began to grin.

The truth of his words began to sink in.

I sat back in my chair and shook my head. I took a deep breath and then began to half-laugh at the thought. He began to laugh too.

Laughter and grace soon found each other.

Patience requires patience.

Going a long distance takes more time than speed.

Sometimes we need an ordinary friend in an overlooked moment of unanswered hurries to remind us.