

WHEN YOUR BACK'S AGAINST THE WALL:

*Rejoice
Anyway!*

DICK GIRARD

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Against
The Wall:
Rejoice Anyway!*

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**Life Communications
Lady Lake, FL**

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Lady Lake, FL 32158
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Second Printing 1998
Third Printing 2004
Fourth Printing 2007

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*God loved His human creatures enough
to allow them to accept or
reject Him as they pleased.
He knew that, without His grace,
they would die.*

*And although “all have sinned,”
loving still in sorrow, He is always ready
to forgive and to extend mercy
to the very last breath.
“...because he first loved us”:
If I truly believe that He is,
I can truly believe that He can.*

INTRODUCTION

*Hear my prayer, O LORD; let my
cry for help come to you.
Do not hide your face from me
when I am in distress. Turn your
ear to me; when I call,
answer me quickly.
For my days vanish like smoke;
my bones burn like glowing embers.
My heart is blighted and withered
like grass;
I forget to eat my food.*

*Because of my loud groaning I am
reduced to skin and bones.
I am like a desert owl,
like an owl among the ruins.
I lie awake; I have become like a
bird alone on a housetop.¹*

¹ Ps. 102:1-7.

*Learned people would try to tell you that
you can and must control your own life.
“After all,” they say,
“we live in the United States of America,
the country that offers its people every
opportunity available to mankind.”
We live in an age that has given all
people the ability to
“really know.”
Unfortunately, standing on every street
corner, you can find someone who
proclaims the only
“true answer.”
For a small token of appreciation,
he or she will allow the world to gain
access to this revelation.*

No person is so lonely as the person who is brought closer to the reality of life's frailty through personal distress. Some day each and every person will deal with the harsh reality that death is an icy-cold fact of life in this world. In that moment, each one must confess:

“This reality is mine. My God, I may die—and I need help!”

A world filled with self-help answers, methods, advice, and resources forces me to question my own reasoning and to add to my own efforts. “Self-help” is not the message of this booklet. There is enough “selfishness” in our world already. Beginning with Adam and Eve, selfishness has been the weapon of Satan against the human race. *Self*, under the guise of personal fulfillment, has stolen the very best from man, leaving him with broken pieces: fragments of joy and happiness. A dim reflection of what could be, instead of the presence and vision of blessed assurance in a God who will not fail. *Self* deceives us, with its utter

delusions of power, control, and assurance:
its false (yes, false) sense of security.

Nonetheless, my inner desires are the same as those of all who are like-minded: I want to speak of the great things of Jesus Christ—specifically, of the things He has done for me. Fearful that no one will listen, I am yet (like the apostle Paul) even more afraid *not* to share the Wonderful News given to me—afraid not to shout from the highest housetop the praises of my God. I am compelled to cleanse my soul in a living testimony.

THE STAGE STANDS PREPARED

My story is not unlike many others. People have experienced far greater pain and sorrow than I. But I believe God has given me something special to place within the grasp of every person who would believe in God and respond to Him. I think it aloud:

*I wonder if I may help even one of
all God's creation to walk into eter-
nity, holding tightly to His hand?...*

1

Stressed by life itself, beaten down by circumstances, defeated by the villain within: the strong grip of fear touches the very bone of reason. How much easier to simply quit! Have you ever been totally controlled by the awareness of mortal danger? The desperation may be your own, or that of a loved one, but either way, it always hurts. Reality screams through one's consciousness: "I can die; I may die; eventually, I *will* die—and there

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is nothing I can do about it. I am helpless; I need help!" In our darkest hour, any other words except God's own become pale, empty, and meaningless—merely additional screens of deceit spread by God's adversaries. If deception wins, man loses; another soul fails to share in the peace that waits to be embraced. So I will write; I will share my testimony. I believe I have no better way to preach the gospel of Christ than to proclaim the fulfillment of the promise of peace, not in the world at large, but certainly in the life of one Christian: myself. The gift of eternal life is given by God to all who would believe, and I believe!

*"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."*²

God is living among His people.

² John 3:16.

*“Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.”*³

Common man that I am, I am able to know and to feel God's presence. God is right by my side when everything is at its bleakest. The thought is awe-inspiring, but true!

*You give me your shield of victory,
and your right hand sustains me; you
stoop down to make me great.*⁴

3

No big flash, no voices raised in cheer, not even one “hip-hip-hooray!” Just God, doing the things He always said He would do, things that would cause others to be amazed—and I was there to watch. I was not amazed; I knelt in awe. Why be amazed at things as small as the saving of my life,

³ Rev. 3:20.

⁴ Ps. 18:35.

when this same God has created the seas? Why be amazed at the skill of a surgeon's guided hand, when this same God proves His power by steering the galaxies? Why be amazed that my God has given me yet another chance at mortal life, when He causes me to breathe and to feel vibrant emotion, though I have been formed from the dust of the earth? So I will sing His praise.

4

The Real Story

The real story is not about the consequences I suffer because of the presence of sin in the world; suffering is the lot of every human being who ever walked on God's green (but fallen) Earth. If you miss this truth, you miss the message of Jesus. The real story is that God provides the only way to get out of this world alive! Miss this message, and you miss the power of the Cross, the forgiveness of sins, and the crown of glory to be given to those who will be victorious!

*“I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”*⁵

Why Me, Lord—Why Me?

My story begins on a night like any other night. There was no warning, no hint of trouble on the horizon, nothing that would cause the slightest alarm or fear. Trouble creeps into our lives in strange ways. I recall a poem by Edgar Allen Poe called “The Fog.” I had to memorize it in school many years ago. Now I see life in a similar way:

5

*The fog creeps in on little cat feet.
Sits on silent haunches.
And then moves on.*

⁵ John 16:33.

No matter what plans we may make, no matter how many bases we may have covered, our world can be brought to an abrupt standstill by events far beyond our control. What happened to me that “foggy” night was nothing short of the beginning of a nightmare that would become 3-D, living color reality. I was a thirty-five year old male, believing myself to be in good health, unsuspecting of any trouble, and then—**pain!**

6 This was the kind of pain you read about, and then wonder if it could possibly ever be real; the kind of pain you desperately hope belongs to somebody else, only so that it may never be your own. Words of denial perched on my lips: “I don’t believe it!” Yet, I knew I was only fooling myself; it was certainly the real thing. “No thank you, please”—but it refused to go away. I have been told that the acknowledgement of pain means accepting its presence, allowing it to exist, and giving in to its grip. But if you focus on it, it will be an all-consuming fire. I do not believe that we mortals can control

every internal and external influence that may come into our lives. (Speaking of internal influences, I would add that the pain was in my mind and soul, as well as in my body.) Let me assure my brothers and sisters in Christ that Christians, as easily as anyone else, may sometimes suffer apart from any good or apparent reason.

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds.⁶

7

My best reflection of the pain's initial visit that dark night would be the image of something like a very ragged, very dull sword, protruding from my chest. I was always of the understanding that heart attacks only struck under stress or hard work; never when one was at rest in one's bed, safe and protected from a harsh world that refuses to know man's worth. But, strike it did—and, believe it or not, I refused to believe it! (I

⁶ James 1:2.

now know that I am not alone in this experience.) By morning, “it” had passed. I was thoroughly convinced “it” was nothing more than the aftermath of late night indulgences. I was glad beyond words that “it” was behind me, a dream I thoroughly intended to forget. Back to business as usual, I thought. What a (bad) joke! That day was the first day of the rest of my life, living with a partner no one would ever choose: *heart sickness* had chosen me! I would be its lifelong companion.

8

Paul the apostle prayed three times to have his affliction taken from him.⁷ I did better than that. I prayed without ceasing. In retrospect, I know now that those prayers were totally selfish and self-centered. Isn't it great that God loves us, even when we are spiritual babes, “knowing it all,” and yet knowing so little!

⁷ See 2 Cor. 12:8.

My thoughts were running far ahead of the present: how cruel to be robbed of years of fun, productivity—the “stuff that life is made of”! Now I know that human life does not come with guarantees. There is no promise of allotted time—not even a limited warranty. My prayer would be that no other human being would have to face what I would encounter from this visitor: seven heart attacks, four open-heart operations, and a twenty-four hour a day ordeal with survival. The truth of the matter is that, because of the presence of sin in the world, large numbers of people face the same sort of dismal future.

9

If my story ended here, it would hardly be worth the effort to tell. From this shambles of a beginning, God raised a ray of faith within me, creating a change that would permeate my life forever.

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him....⁸

Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.⁹

10

*I pray that through me,
God
may give others a grasp of
hope,
a Spirit of strength,
and a desire to persevere—
one day receiving His
golden crown of glory.*

⁸ Rom. 8:28.

⁹ Ps. 51:10-12.

A MOMENT OF REFLECTION

Before I begin, let me share with you a moment of reflection. It was seven heart attacks later, and just thirty days following my fourth open-heart operation. I was in the assembly of my local church, and against the well-meant protests of many concerned brothers and sisters in Christ, I wanted to share my thoughts and feelings about living in the presence of the Savior. It was not to be a sermon. It was not a theological treatise. It was just the spoken thoughts of a Christian who, in his own experience, found that he could (and did) find peace without fear while living in what some have called "the jaws of death." Many heart-searching events stood between my testimony and the day on which that fourth heart crisis began. It would have been unfair then, as it would be now, to jump ahead and not tell the story as it actually happened.

I, Too, Know the Feeling; I Am One of the Lonely

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Looking out the window at the amber reflections of light high above the sea of blacktop, I am busy pushing back the darkness of my many fears, and the terrifying mental images that paralyze my soul. I feel tired. Beverly, my wife, stands at my side as she always does, stronger than any wife could reasonably be expected to be. She has been proven through the fires of many such mornings; she is beyond belief as she copes. This makes the fourth time we've waited together for the dawn that would usher in the medical workers, heading toward another day of plying their trade. But today is a very special day. Today, they work on *my* body! Sin has certainly kept man busy since the day of that first fatal decision in the Garden of Eden! When you hurt, when you feel the shiver pass your way, when you jump at the chill of your own hand, it's terribly hard to

say the words: "I am a sinful man." But God Himself has said:

Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned—¹⁰

Before I tell you the Good News, allow me to step back many days to a time when this man thought he was invincible, made of stainless steel—or, at least equal to the infamous Tabby, with the luck of, not one, but nine lives. All in all, a rather nice place to be. Have you been there? Most of us have. Youth has its rewards: able to leap tall buildings with the energy derived from the supersaturated quick-fix foods that we all know are bad for us, but which taste too good to be really "bad." Served in their own snap-locked styrofoam cases which are likewise indestructible, washed down with

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¹⁰ Rom. 5:12.

“The Real Thing (Uh-Huh).” Leave the sugar free and decaffeinated stuff to the senior set. Sleep needs were measured in minutes, rather than hours. We were infused with a need to know the inner workings and purpose of everything that moves—often stepping to the “ragged edge” just to sense the rush of simply being alive. At thirty-five, I was counting the passing years slowly, learning what maturity really means, and hoping to handle the changes that come with the passing of time. There was plenty of time remaining; we could think about the serious issues of life “tomorrow.”

This was the mental environment I cherished. If we are honest with ourselves, we will admit that these are the comfortable sort of feelings that each one of us has enjoyed. We tend to value personal honesty in ourselves; have you noticed? We call it “quality of character.” Most often, it is the other guy who did us wrong. It is difficult to admit: “I was wrong.” It is easier to believe that it is always “the other guy.” It contin-

ues to the other side of the coin, as well: *He* wins the new car, the trip to the islands; it never happens to me. It is almost as if we enjoyed the feeling: "If it wasn't for bad luck, I wouldn't have any luck at all."

It was like that dream of falling that brings you to a full awakening one second before you hit the ground, at that very peak of excitement when the hair on the back of your neck stands up and tingles— just before the scream escapes your throat. I was feeling pain that was so intense, it was as though it could be seen crouching, poised. I was helpless, and I knew I was not in control. This time, it was not "the other guy." It was me!

15

"It's your heart ...the arteries, to be more exact. But you're young; an operation, a change of habits—we've treated this condition many times. Nothing to worry about." I believed it all—the first time! I even believed it the second time. I wanted to believe it the third time. I went to the full

extent, giving my “all,” knowing in my heart (no pun intended) that modern medicine would likewise do its best. After all, we live in the good ol' U.S.A., the land of milk and honey—the very best of the best! I went through the trial three times, and each time said, “Believe.” I believe it no more.

Man can do his very best. Man will strive to new heights, straining for the hidden golden treasure that always lies just beyond the reach of his outstretched fingers. He is

16 never satisfied with the accomplishments of yesterday. He is always wanting more. But man has not stopped the dark shadow of death as it walks the corridors of the living. I know now that God is right: man will never stop the pangs of death by his own strength alone. Now I know that God has told us what is “true,” what is “real”: sin and death entered the world on that day when the first man decided to disobey the Creator.¹¹ Along with sin came toil, pain,

¹¹ Read Gen. 3:1-6.

sickness, disease, and every infirmity known to mankind. Man caused it; man will suffer the consequences. As far as my own heart sickness is concerned, I am innocent in my own eyes. Sin is Satan's tool, and sin does not care about "fairness." God loves people, but people still die. No wonder so many ask, "Why?"

"Sign here, please." The words are spoken softly, for the hour has not yet reached sunrise. An endless sea of paperwork has to be filled out, witnessed, and filed. It is sobering to be reduced to a number/name, complete with data base: past, present, and future. My mind is challenged to return to consciousness, having busied itself with daydreams in the bleak hours before the dawn. Each person has a way of coping. The presence of the white dresses, coats, and suits may even bring flashes of anger to those of us who are tempted to feel that it's "us" (the afflicted) against "them" (the health care professionals). Of course, it's not.

They do their job as best they can. To the healthy, they are the angels of mercy. To the sick, they are the reminder that no haven exists on earth that is secure from the touch of the grim reaper—not even the stark, sterilized, stainless steel arenas of the healers. I have every respect for those who toil in the service of the sick. Thank God that men and women work in the medical profession. Thank God that He has placed this service to man at our disposal. Thank God that He cares! My mind thinks, “I would be happier at this moment if I were thanking God for perfect health”—the thing most people take for granted. Health rarely concerns us until we are sick. Physical fitness may concern us, but we rarely think of losing our health as we plan for the future. “It could never happen to me!”

We see ourselves as the standard of truth, honesty, morality, fairness, and intelligence. We see ourselves as entirely “the perfectionist.” We may never utter these beliefs aloud, but they are ours, just the same. The

“other guy” probably did something in his life to deserve being punished. Me? I don’t deserve problems, I deserve the very “best.”

Who am I? I am a man who has chosen to walk and to work in the service of our Lord. I stand before God’s children speaking the messages of the Scriptures, knowing that God is the only Way of Life. He is the Creator, the Protector, the Comforter, the Fulfillment of the Promise of eternal happiness. I am proud to be counted a gospel preacher. Yet, when I am low of heart, I silently ask the same question: Why? Why? Why?

19

Where would I be this day’s dawning without God by my side? How could I stand the enormous stress without Jesus? How could I “keep on keepin’ on”? This is the message of the Scriptures, and it is my message.

Very soon, someone will be standing at a window like mine: a window in a strange

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house filled with sickness and worry. We call such houses "beautiful medical centers." Within these gleaming, sterile surroundings of advanced modern technology are housed the same old problems. Man is frail and will face his own death. Maybe today is your day. Maybe it's the day for someone you love. "Waiting!" A dying world will cause an endless line of names and faces to wait, locked in silent combat within themselves. Inwardly, we speak hollow words, searching for strength. We hope the words will bring us inner comfort, or at least the courage to face the next rising sun. The enemy will not wait even one minute, not one second. Like so many others, I still pray for just a little time, so that I might be better prepared. As I wait, I find myself wondering if I have really given this enough thought. I wonder: Should I get a second opinion? Or even a third? I don't really feel that bad anymore. Why, I'll bet that any day now, they will invent a medicine that will be ideal for me. Yes—any day now!

While speaking to His followers, Jesus said:

*"Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."*¹²

Why do I wonder if He knew that I'd be in this fix today? Why would I expect that, just because I'm a believer in Him, I would be protected from all the pitfalls of life? He did promise:

21

*"...surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age."*¹³

At first, I find no more consolation in these thoughts than others have found. But I accept them. I know Jesus hated the thoughts that filled His mind on that dreadful night in

¹² Matt. 6:34.

¹³ Matt. 28:20.

the Garden.¹⁴ He was a real man, and men worry. His anguish was in the early hours, like my own. Sleep had eluded Him, as it does me. His body felt the heat of distress that seems to flush your face and shorten your breath, making your chest hurt as you struggle just to take the next breath, and then the next. Fear can be specifically defined:

*And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.*¹⁵

22

One day, the fear of hopelessness and its companion, the chill of loneliness, will be at your door. You, too, will feel the dread of sorrow, as He did. Some of you may have been there already. I have. I know how it feels. I know how alone a person can be, facing the day with friends on the left and

¹⁴ See Luke 22:24.

¹⁵ Ibid.

on the right—a sad band of loved ones, far too many for the size of the room. Jesus, Your friends ran away and left You even more alone than I am now! And no one can go in my place. Even now, a smile crosses my heart as I think: Even if it were possible, who would I allow to take my place? I know some who would, if they could. So here I am, not wanting to go, and yet unable to send another in my place.

How Did You Do It, Jesus?

23

Jesus, how did You do it? Why did You put Yourself in that position? You knew You would never walk away from the coming day. A hilltop, a cross, following the will of Your Father: This is what He planned for You. It hurt to even think about the future. You knew Your earthly life had ended. As a mortal man, You would never know another season, another joy. Finished! But not yet; there was still a day to face, still

work to be done—hard work. You knew the hearts of the men who offered strong talk and loud promises of loyalty. They would quit.

You knew the day would come when men would desert you, when they would run to save themselves, oblivious to the concerns of others. This world says, “Run, run! Save yourself! Maybe you can escape the fate of the others! Every man for himself!” When the rubber meets the road, it is natural to think of self-preservation. Or perhaps I should say, it is natural not to think at all and let natural instinct take over, causing you to forget everything and run! Yes, it is natural, isn't it? At least it seems so, for those who face the uncertain future alone. Jesus, how weak we are, forgetting Your many warnings! You told us, “They want Me to suffer today, but your turn will come. Oh, yes; your turn will come. You will feel the cold kiss Satan has in store for you. He believes he can defeat My followers by

putting you to the sword or hanging you on a tree. But the end is near—and I win!"

With the words of Jesus ringing in their ears, His disciples were never able to run fast enough from the voice of the Master speaking within:

*"You do not want to leave too, do you?"*¹⁶

If I could place a response on the lips of Peter following the arrest of Jesus, I believe it would have sounded something like this: "Yes, Lord, You did tell us everything; but in our fears, we forgot. We ran scared and found a place to hide! I tried, I really did; You know that." 25

My thoughts race far ahead, wanting to "get it all out." Knowing in my heart that God has His plan for sharing His blessings with all humanity, I am yet ever zealous to reach

¹⁶ John 6:67.

as many as possible in my allotted time. And I will, for this is what enables me to deal with my own mortality, which is the destiny of every man and woman. I draw strength to live from the Giver of Life!

I am like other human beings. Satan plants his lying messages in our minds, and we mentally curse. Like Peter, in my weakness I begin to sink.¹⁷

Now, Jesus! I need You now!

26

¹⁷ See Matt. 14:30.

...AND NOW, FOR THE GOOD NEWS!

I feel that I am blessed, because I am able to understand that, through the testing of my faith as if through fire, I learn about *me*! God knows my every thought. God knows my heart. God isn't the one who learns of my faith through these trials; *I am!* I learn about trust, hope, belief—faith!

*These [trials] have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.*¹⁸

27

Jesus walked the sin-laden lands of Earth, revealing God's power and will. We have no other method for understanding God than the information He personally provides for

¹⁸ 1 Peter 1:7.

us. No amount of human effort or determination would provide a single fragment of knowledge, one shred of helpful information, one glimpse of truth—unless God first allowed it to be known. All the books of interpretation and speculation are but empty words from the pens of the arrogant without God's revelation; they are simply additional fuel for the fires of confusion.

Why would we think then, that we have to run a test in order for God to evaluate us?

28 Why would we have to prove ourselves to Him? He sees the innermost parts of our being—the places we hide, those “things best kept hidden.” He knows the motives behind our every action, both good and bad. We who believe the Word of God know that our perfection is not accomplished by anything in or of ourselves; it is a gift from Him. None of our own accomplishments can bring us to a state of acceptability before God. Let me make this point clear: It is God, not man, who determines what is acceptable. To be righteous in His eyes, we

can do nothing more or less than to obediently accept His plan.

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.¹⁹

Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.²⁰

29

¹⁹ Eph. 2:8-10.

²⁰ Rom. 4:4-5.

*Each new day is a gift from God.
How you live it
Is your gift to Him.*

*“We are powerless.”
This is the state of man
without God and without the
cleansing blood of Jesus Christ.*

- 30 It is through living the committed Christian life that we bring glory, honor, and praise to our Savior, Jesus Christ. Commitment does not always come easily or quickly. We see in Scripture that the apostle Peter grew into a great ambassador for Christ. Along the way, he stumbled and fell, needing the understanding and forgiveness of God—not unlike ourselves:

“Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed

*for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail.”*²¹

Satan is in the world today, and he is not without power.

Sin and Man: At Odds

It is not surprising that one of the hardest things for people to understand is the simple explanation of death found in God's revealed Word. Man does not, and will not, accept it without a fight. “No! I will fight to the very end, kicking, pushing, cursing—and I expect God Himself to take notice!” “How arrogant,” you say. “No one would ever put thoughts like these into words”—or would they?

31

²¹ Luke 22:31-32.

Is God's explanation of death really as simple as it seems? To understand the Word of God, we must first let it flow freely from page to mind:

*“...but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.”*²²

A moment in time, so very long ago, far from the world that touches our lives today.

32 And yet, God *did* say it: “...you will surely die.” Anyone who believes that God “is” also believes that God would not lie. Looking closely at the fall of Adam and Eve, we find that they did not immediately die, physically. Could God have made a mistake? Could He have rescinded His promise without telling anyone? Or could it be that some of us simply do not understand exactly what God meant when He said what He said? Although the promise of God was true, some

²² Gen. 2:17.

people base their understanding purely on the physical appearance, overlooking the spiritual aspect altogether.

“God is spirit....” ²³

So God created man in His own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. ²⁴

It is not my intention to defend God. He 33 needs no such service. Before the Fall, man was in a state of blessedness within the Garden of God's design. The presence of sin, death, and error obviously are introduced with the activity of the Serpent (Devil) within the Garden. It is a fallacy to believe that, before the Fall, the Garden totally and perfectly reflected our heavenly

²³ John 4:24.

²⁴ Gen. 1:27.

home. If it had, we would have to admit that Satan will be present in heaven also, which leads to the following thoughts:

1. Evil must be present in heaven.
2. The potential for evil exists in heaven.
3. Do God and evil eternally coexist?
4. Is God in heaven, or not?
5. Is our desire to live with God for eternity a real possibility?
6. How long will it be before I sin in heaven?
7. Will I be cast out of heaven?

34

Doubts about our eternal life are born:

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made.²⁵

²⁵ Gen. 3:1.

God wanted His creation to desire from within to love and be loved.

We love because he first loved us.²⁶

This required that man have the ability to decide for himself. Free will was necessary, and along with it, the possibility of making mistakes and errors. God knows His creation. He knew from the very onset of time that man would need the forgiveness which is only attainable by the perfect sacrifice of the Savior, Jesus Christ. Redemption was never an afterthought. Only God (who created all things, knows all things, and provides all things) controls all things. When He tells us that He has provided in order that His human creatures may never die, how foolish it is for man to doubt! Such a doubter may have head knowledge, but without application to one's personal life, it remains abstract and of little comfort.

35

²⁶ 1 John 4:19.

Herein lies the ever-nagging feeling of failure. Is God really who He says He is? Through faith, it is the privilege of the Christian (Christ-follower) to know that God is God, and therefore will provide what He has promised. This is the heart of the gospel message. Hear, from Scripture, the clear statements proclaiming the Good News:

36

*...because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.*²⁷

Please allow me to express these words in outline form:

1. ...from the beginning
2. God chose you

²⁷ 2 Thess. 2:13-14.

3. to be saved...
4. you might share in the glory....

The question is: In our darkest hour, do we—can we—believe that God cares?

Standing Firm

37

This beautiful gift of free will is the very same power that we exercise in choosing to

1. believe God
2. conform to His will
3. walk in the light of Christ
4. lean on Christ
5. accept God's gift of eternal life

God loved His human creatures enough to allow them to accept or reject Him as they

pleased. He knew that, without His grace, they would die. And although “all have sinned,” loving still in sorrow, He is always ready to forgive and to extend mercy to the very last breath. “...*because he first loved us.*” If I truly believe that He is, I can truly believe that He can.

*He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.*²⁸

38

I find it very strange to hear from the troubled person that he/she wishes that God had never given us freedom of choice. Such persons reason that, without free choice, there could be no mistakes, no errors, no consequences, and therefore no pain. I have resigned myself to the fact that, even with numerous rational explanations, it is only the state of the moment that is speaking in despair, and not the mind that really seeks to

²⁸ 2 Peter 3:9.

understand or (heaven forbid) make changes in life-style. Robots, mindless mechanical things, doing only what is programmed into them; actions without emotions, as thoughtless as any other of God's "soul-less" creations—can you even begin to fathom the ramifications of such a state? No joy, no smiles, no tugs at the heart producing the tears of happiness that flush the human spirit. Think how it would be to have no ability to experience the first step of a baby, no capacity to appreciate the touch of your spouse, or the grin of some less fortunate person you've helped. Imagine never getting a personal response, even from yourself—that audible sigh that speaks of a job well done.

No! I believe no living person would exchange even one minute of freedom for an existence without feelings. What would be the point? This is "real life"; it is blessed with mountain tops and plagued with valleys. And because of sin, we spend most of our lives traveling between the two. Our

God has given His children more than a future eternal life; He has given them eternal life in the present, even while they live and breathe in this world, mortal and imperfect as they are—and as I am! In myself, I am not even right in my own eyes—and certainly unfit to be presented before the King; yet, I will be presented before Him! And what does God see?

40

*“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”*²⁹

But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. If we claim to be without sin, we de-

²⁹ John 3:16-17.

ceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. ³⁰

Heaven's Peace

41 There are indeed many other Scriptures I could cite for our study, but the day I read these passages and took them to heart was the day I knew my life would never end in shambles and despair.

This was the day I understood that, whatever the prince of death might hurl at me in this lifetime, it would have no effect on my date with my Savior.

³⁰ 1 John 1:7-9.

This was the day I felt the security and peace that only God can give.

This was the day I was able to comprehend just what it means to “belong to Jesus.”

This was the day I believed I had really received eternal life: life without end; life that lives.

Lest someone should **mistake** my meaning, let me state a few of my own convictions which I strongly hold to be facts:

42

1. Man cannot force God into any agreement.
2. Man cannot out-think or out-smart God.
3. Man cannot hold God for ransom.
4. God does not “make deals.”
5. God is all-knowing, all-powerful, all-present, all-righteous, all-just, all-merciful, and all-true.

6. God knows His own: both who is, and who is not.
7. Sin brought death to all mankind.
8. God offers eternal life on His terms.
9. We choose to accept or reject His offer.
10. Not everyone will submit to God.
11. In God there is life, but without God there is only death in “self.”

It is absurd to think that man can pay lip service to God one moment, turn his back on God the next moment by deliberately sinning, and yet God has no choice but to accept sin and receive that willful sinner back as though he (or she) were perfect. There is no such thing as “once saved, always saved.” What fool would desire, follow, believe, or respect a “god” who would make such compromises with the Devil?

43

No, I speak of a God who knows His own, and of a created being who believes and obeys his Creator. This is the beautiful and

blessed union of Creator and creature of which the Bible speaks. My intention is to encourage the downhearted. The Lord willing, there will be other opportunities to enter into detailed exegesis of Scripture. I do not make these statements to “ride a hobby horse” of pet practices and convictions, or my personal theological platform. On the contrary: I strongly feel that a one hundred percent, larger than life, total, undoubting, personal, from the guts, cross-your-heart-and-hope-to-die trust in a perfect God is an absolute “must.”

44

In my own case, I do not believe I could peacefully rest (i.e., “let all my weight down”) nor give full submission of my body, mind, soul, and spirit without *unreserved trust*. Trust is the prerequisite of release; without release into the open care of God, life and death must remain my battle. Only from this kernel of trust in God springs the true sense of my “confidence in faith.” The knowledge that God is at the helm of the universe is exactly what is

needed in order to exchange every personal distress for the serene peace and bliss of trusting God.

Please allow me to quote a few passages of Scripture for you to prayerfully reflect upon and consider:

*And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God fore-knew he also predestined to be con-formed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he pre-destined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified. What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us?*³¹

³¹ Rom. 8:28-31.

And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory. ³²

46

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. ³³

³² Eph. 1:13-14. See also 2 Cor. 1:22; 5:5.

³³ Rom. 8:38-39.

Having come to this relationship with my God, I can honestly say that all other minor questions have found their answers. I mean that my heavenly Father loves me with a "*love complete*": He will care for me; I have nothing to lose, everything to gain. Even when I do not understand, I "*trust and obey*," for I am an heir to my Father's eternal kingdom.

It saddens me to hear God's Word in Scripture telling me that some people will be lost. Some of the very people I dearly love will not be saved. Even among those who look and sound like the "best of the best" in all of Christendom are some whose hearts are calloused, as heavy as millstones, refusing to bow and believe. These I must leave to the only true Judge: Jesus, who will one day judge the world.

47

I have no joy, but only sorrow, for those who refuse to accept and obey Jesus. But thanks be to God, there is still time for them! I will pray for them. My joy and

desire is to share with those who are counted among the brotherhood of believers. Jesus has promised that He will never leave us alone.

*“And surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age.”*³⁴

*“I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.”*³⁵

48

*“And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever....”*³⁶

I am convinced that the submissive soul who allows God to send His Spirit into his or her heart is the one who finds inner

³⁴ Matt. 28:20.

³⁵ John 14:18.

³⁶ John 14:16.

peace. The peace I am talking about is one that I had never before experienced: the peace and understanding that defy imagination.

*“Be still, and know that I am God....”*³⁷

I can bring nothing to this relationship to God except full submission and obedience from the heart. This brings freedom like that of the eagle on the wing. I found a flood of trusting resilience that came, not from my own strength, but from the strength provided by a loving God. **49**

I came to understand, as Paul the apostle understood, that my strength is my weakness. I can rejoice when my heart is broken:

You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The

³⁷ Ps. 46:10.

*sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God,
you will not despise.*³⁸

*Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us tends toward envy, but he gives us more grace? That is why Scripture says: “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” Submit yourselves, then, to God.*³⁹

50

But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weak-

³⁸ Ps. 51:16-17.

³⁹ James 4:5-7.

nesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.⁴⁰

Should We Not Learn From the Past?

But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. For we are to God the aroma of Christ....⁴¹

51

Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God. Not that we are competent to claim anything

⁴⁰ 2 Cor. 12:9-10.

⁴¹ 2 Cor.2:14-15.

for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. ⁴²

LORD, you have assigned me my portion and my cup; you have made my lot secure. The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; surely I have a delightful inheritance. I will praise the LORD, who counsels me; even at night my heart instructs me. I have set the LORD always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken. Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure, because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay. You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy

in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand. ⁴³

Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil. ⁴⁴

In the moments when it seems that Satan has won, when breathing demands every ounce of my remaining strength, I hear again in disbelief the doctors' verdict, and I am overwhelmed. Nothing is left within me. The mental anguish matches the physical pain. This is *my* "Waterloo," *my* "Alamo." Fear is the only emotion that fills my senses. Not a whisper can I produce; if my strength were in only myself, I have already lost. Thank

53

⁴³ Ps. 16:5-11.

⁴⁴ Eccl. 12:13-14.

God that I am not alone! My heart knows, my soul knows, my spirit within me knows that I have no strength left—and, most importantly, my God knows!

*In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will. And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.*⁴⁵

MY TESTIMONY: FROM MY HEART

I pray that my testimony may reveal the thoughts of my soul to those in need of the peace of God. My testimony is reproduced here from a tape-recorded transcript, essentially as I delivered it on that Lord's Day morning in February, standing before my brothers and sisters in Christ.

55

The message within is not just for the Christian. On the contrary, my prayer is that everyone may see Jesus, as I see Him.

Good morning. I want to tell you about a day to remember in the life of one who believes. It has been thirty days since I last stood before you, and many things have happened to me since then. I feel like a new preacher because I'm scared, so you are going to have to bear with me. Before I

begin, I want to thank each and every one of you for everything that you have done for us in the last thirty days: the love you've expressed, the financial help, the prayers, and the personal encouragement that we just couldn't do without. Beverly and I thank you.

56

I don't have much of a voice, so it's going to be a squeaky lesson. It's not going to be a sermon; it's going to be a testimony. You see, I don't have one word prepared to tell you—not one. I've stood here many times and brought you lessons and sermons about understanding the Word of God, knowing that He is preaching to us through His Word. When He says, "I want you to ask, I want you to seek, and I want you to knock," He's saying that directly to us. He is giving us a way to answer Him. Jesus said, "If you follow My teachings, you will know the truth and the truth will set you free." I have tried to bring you lessons that would reveal Jesus the Savior to you. You see, I wanted you to believe in Jesus Christ, and I wanted you to

understand that when you believe, faith becomes a part of you. Faith grows between you and Jesus, and becomes a personal relationship. You will find that Jesus is seeking you! He is able. He cares about us. He becomes a reality in our lives. Simple "belief" will turn into something that is truly precious, called "trust."

We'll trust Him, and we'll put our lives in His hands. It will become a personal relationship. You and I are here together, united in worship today. Yet, you and I are individuals. We have our own little worlds that we deal with. Even our family members are not really part of them. We're all individuals, and I want you to have an individual relationship with Jesus. I taught you these kinds of lessons, because out of this relationship of trust in Jesus develops something of substance that we call our "faith." We need faith sixty seconds a minute, sixty minutes an hour, and twenty-four hours a day. And when you need "faith," what you really need is Jesus! He is there! My testi-

mony today is about peace that comes from having that kind of faith. It's one thing to hear Jesus say, "I give you My peace, My peace I leave with you. There is no reason to fear, no reason to be in doubt." I've brought many lessons showing you what God wants us to believe, but have we believed?

58

Today I want to bring you something different. I want to bring you more: a little bit about what it is really like to have Jesus Christ in your life to deal with a very difficult problem. Now I think I am somewhat of an authority on this subject, because on February thirteenth, I had what became my fourth open-heart surgery. I know what it is to face death. I know the fear of facing the unknown. And I know that someday each one of us is going to have to face this problem. It may be ourselves, or perhaps one of our family members, one of our children. I want to talk about fear today—fear of facing this kind of problem. I don't just want to tell you what happened to me; I want you to be

there. I want you to share the emotion of February thirteenth with me. You see, I know that God has worked in my life, and I want to tell you a little bit about His work because we don't have enough testimony from those who have had these experiences.

One month ago today, I left home to go to Tennessee for a much needed rest. I was totally frustrated because no doctor in New York state would even consider helping me. My expectations of success in the Boston hospitals were crushed when all my medical records, which had been sent there, seemed to fall apart, along with my high hopes of a quick cure. Doctors with inflated egos, in my opinion, seemed more interested in who was right and who was wrong than in taking care of me. One man was telling me to prepare for a complete heart transplant; another was asking, "Have you tried this miracle drug? You may be able to feel great without surgery. Now, what do you want to do?" As if I knew what had to be done! It all just fell apart, so we sent all my records

to another one of the major hospitals in the country: Cleveland Clinic in Ohio.

The pressure had become so great that I wasn't sure I would be able to cope with it; so Beverly and I left for Tennessee, looking forward to a week of Christian lectures. On Monday morning, the day after we left New York, I called Cleveland Clinic. I have no idea how, but I talked personally to one of the busiest doctors in one of the busiest hospitals in the country. This doctor always takes Mondays off, but he was there that day, and he spoke with me. He said, "You know, Dick, I can help you. I can take care of your problem. As a matter of fact, if you can be here on Friday, we will do the operation on my next day off [the following Monday]. Come and see us."

60

Do you think God might have had something to do with this? We arrived in Cleveland around 1:00 A.M. on a Friday morning. Eight hours later, we began the tests which lasted seven full hours. After those seven

hours, they knew everything there was to know about my condition. The operation was set for Tuesday. The doctor felt the case was difficult enough that he needed to clear more time in the event of complications.

There was no fear in my thinking—yet. We were so busy, things were happening so quickly, that there wasn't time to think. My wife Beverly took over the controls and did everything in her power to keep the stress out of my life, so that I could cope with the fear that should have come. She did a great job in preparing us for Tuesday. Five hundred miles from home is a difficult place to start dealing with the problems of life. There we were, three days away from the open-heart operation. What do you do in a strange city for three days? Should a Christian worry? Should he have fear like every other person who doesn't know God? All the lessons I've taught have dealt with putting God on the throne of one's life. Taking "self" off the throne, doing away with the kingdom of self and replacing it with Jesus

on the throne of one's life—these are the themes of my teaching. Jesus became everything there was in my life. I preached these lessons, and, fortunately, I listened! I knew that Jesus was starting to work in my life. What would we do for the next three days? Well, even there God provided.

62

Sunday, I was sitting on the bed in my BVD's with my daughter Lora and my wife, wondering what I was going to do. God provided our good friends, Bob and Penny Boduch, to be there with us. The first thing Penny said to me was, "Did you expect us?" Five hundred miles from home, in my underwear, hiding from the world in Cleveland, mentally alone, and she wondered if I was expecting them! God also provided for us with the arrival of my daughter Robyn, my mother and sister, followed by Beverly's two sisters. We would not be alone; we would share these trying moments with family and friends.

Cleveland Clinic has a rather unique admittance policy called "T.C.I." The initials stand for "To Come In"; this means that, no matter how stressful your situation may be, one must wait until the day scheduled for surgery to be admitted to the hospital (unless you are there because you can't walk at all). Of course, I believe the real intent of "T.C.I." is essentially to save the insurance company's money; however, God used this "T.C.I." admittance policy to prevent me from being overwhelmed with fear, loneliness, and anxiety.

63

Monday, the thirteenth day of February, started for me at 4:00 A.M. It's dark at four in the morning; if fear is going to rear its ugly head, it will do it in the darkness before the dawn. The people who had come to help and encourage us found it difficult to be cheery at 4:00 A.M., but they tried. Each one of them said to me, "You know, if I could change places with you, I would do it in a second." The strange thing was that this was to be my fourth time; I knew what

it was going to be like. How could they have even imagined? There was no way in the world I would have ever allowed someone I love to go through that for me. God gave me the strength to say, "No, I think I'd better do it this time; after all, I'm the one who has the experience."

64

We all deal with fear in different ways. One person said to me, "You know, Dick, this may be your lucky time." "Well," I said, "maybe you'd better explain that to me, because I really don't feel all that lucky."

"Think about it this way," he said, "You've had seven heart attacks now, and three open-heart operations. That's ten. This is the eleventh event; eleven is lucky!" I went away from that conversation thinking to myself, "Wow! I wonder why I never thought of that before? Why didn't I realize I was so lucky?" Remember: I want you to "be there" with me, to really see what it would be like. I want you to hear my testimony. Would you have felt like one of the "lucky ones"? Have you ever entered a

hospital at 5:30 A.M.? It's really a unique experience; not at all friendly or cheerful. Everything seemed to have an ominous feeling of dread about it.

The elevator we step into is brand-new; still, in those early morning hours we hear it creak from some unknown over-use. In the darkness, it sounds old, tired. As it whisks us up to the seventh floor, I think to myself, "I don't remember it making this much noise this afternoon. I wonder if it is really going to get us there? Could this be the end of my old problem, and the beginning of an entirely new one?" It's amazing what goes through your mind when you don't really want to think at all.

They allow you to bring your family with you to the surgical unit, so with my wife and children in tow, I put on a happy face as I enter the unit. I am determined to go through this thing with confidence, knowing that Jesus is going to help me through it. At such times, we tend to busy ourselves with

saying good-bye to the people who love us; I can feel their compassion for me. I find myself praying: "Lord, help these people. Help Beverly to help them; show her that Jesus loves her, and that we can make it through even this dreadful thing together. Let her know that she is not alone. I know that you are going to take care of me, but take care of her, too."

We proceed to a prearranged meeting place. There are two other men who face the same sort of problem that I'm about to face. It's their first time. One of them is continually talking, as if he doesn't want to stop long enough to actually think about what is going to happen to him. He seems to think that if he talks, it won't really happen. The other man is just the opposite; he has his wife and children with him, but he isn't saying a word. No one knows exactly what to say, but here we are: a Christian man and two other men, facing a most uncertain situation. The Christian is thinking about how much he could say to these two men. He could tell

them that if they knew Jesus, it would be simple. But perhaps it's too late for that kind of admonition, or maybe it's not "the right time." (Of course, in retrospect, it's always the right time to speak of Jesus.) The door to the unit is locked. Here we are, ready to do battle—and the door is locked! It takes so much control to remain calm, and now we must wait. Patience is not my strong suit; maybe not a quality I possess at all. We stand in the hallway, looking at each other. There's just nothing left to say. Jesus is there with the Christian. The Christian knows He's there for the others, as well. The sad thing is, the others do not know Him, and so they wait in fear, alone.

Finally, the nurse arrives. Now it begins: we face the challenge. If it's got to be done, let's get it over with. The nurse says, "Could you wait right here and just give me a minute to prepare this room for you?" The "talking man" begins to talk even more than he did before. The silence from the other side is deafening. My children are

hurting because they don't have one word to say to their father in the form of encouragement. Beverly has a lot to say, but she is not happy. At last, we are allowed into the room.

68

Remember when I talked about “the kingdom of Self versus the kingdom of God”? I don't ever want to be alone in the kingdom of Self again in my life! It's too hard. I can remember the days without Jesus. Thank God for His grace! We enter a small alcove and stand in the light. The darkness of early morning is gone; it's bright, stark. The light is shining, and we are about to do things only found in nightmares. I'm glad I'm standing here, “a child of the King.” If I were trying to do this alone, it would be tough. Remember, I've been in this position three times before. I know it's going to get tougher. As the saying goes: “You ain't seen nothin' yet.”

It's going to get worse. Humility and dignity are going to come into play—that old “ego”

thing again. The nurse directs us into three small curtained areas, but the curtains apparently cannot be closed, in keeping with hospital reputation ("too little, too late"). The nurse says, "Take off anything you weren't born with and give it to your family. We're going to provide a robe and gown for you." Understand: if "Self" were really in control, he would never permit such gowns as they give you in the hospital to even exist! You know the kind I'm talking about: the ones with the snaps that are broken, and that never stay up. Those who have ever been in the hospital know about the "backs" of these gowns! I hope you see how God provides a little bit of humor in even the worst of conditions. God has a sense of humor, and fear hasn't really entered the picture yet. Someone might think, "Things don't get any worse than this"; then he or she finds that the gowns are broken, too short, too small! Suddenly, you discover that you stick to the bed, because there's this plastic cover on it "just in case...." Surely,

it's not going to get any worse than this—is it?

The man is still talking on my right; on the other side, silence. I can't believe how absolutely quiet my children are, trying to look at the ceiling—anywhere, but at me. They see me in this little gown, and it makes them uncomfortable. Beverly has been here before, too; she is really getting nervous. O, God—provide us with something; we need it now! At that very thought, in comes the surgeon. This man has a personality that can dominate, not only a conversation, but whole rooms instantly. You'd like him. He's very busy, but he always has time for you. When you need to talk, he's always got time for you—and we need to talk! He said, "You know what? I've got to tell you the truth: you've got nothing to worry about today, because God is the pilot here, and I'm just the copilot. You and I are just helping Him do His work. You haven't got a thing to worry about." That moment was the first time I saw my children smile since arriving

at the hospital. This man just went from surgeon to "water-walker"! In Beverly's eyes, he went right to the top of the hit parade. Now that she's got him on her side, things are not going to get any worse. He leaves to prepare himself for the work ahead.

In our earlier discussion of "Self," I had mentioned how Self has a habit of letting us down. A man enters the room and says, "Now it's my turn, Dick. I have a chart here that says we're going to have to shave you in various areas of your body; not everywhere—a little bit here, a little bit there." I thought I'd looked bad in that gown; I look terrible when he gets through with me! I had forgotten; I'd thought I was going to take everything I was born with into that operating room. Not so. Now a little bit of it is lying on the floor, a little patch here, a little patch there. It doesn't get any worse than this, right?

"Self" is not in control here. It is certainly going to get worse. A woman dressed in mint-green coveralls walks in and says, "Dick, I have this hypodermic needle; it's going to be necessary for you to lie down on your stomach." I remember now: it does get worse! But why is there still no fear? God is providing, among other things, His peace. My children laugh at the thought of me getting this shot, while stark theological revelations race through my mind. Is the appropriate attitude one of seriousness, or is it a time to be comical? Not one of them is offering to take my place now! To them, it is comical; to me, it is deadly serious. Should I laugh because my children are smiling, or should I cry because I know that it's happening all over again?

Recall that the purpose of this story is to deliver my testimony about how fear is dealt with when Jesus is in your corner. When He is on your side, you are not alone. If I were trying to do this alone, I would have been out of control. Back to the elevator we go,

heading for the “big show.” This time, the elevator seems intimidating because it is bringing us to the moment we all dread: the moment when we must part. My children are holding my hands as my wife stands beside me. We will soon have to say good-bye. My thoughts and feelings are: “God, I pray that You will be with them. You’re going to be taking care of me today. It’s going to be harder on them. They must wait for the doctor to come back and say, ‘Good news, everything’s fine!’ It’s going to be hard for them to understand, as they wait, that I don’t have to do anything because God is going to protect me.” How hard it is to watch your wife and children leave you! I believe I can feel the pain and anguish that they feel, heavy and thick with want, and the love that is being poured out from them to me. Somehow, even up to this point, God has kept back the fear.

73

When Jesus was going to the cross, He came to a point where His family and friends left Him—not because they wanted to, but be-

cause fear drove them away. As they went down that road together, there came that point where Jesus had to face the event alone. They were separated, and Jesus was left alone. I wonder whether God provided Him with the same faith and love He is now providing for me? I wonder if Jesus was free from fear? My questions need no answer, for I already know. I know for certain that Jesus knew fear, even as I do. In the Garden of Gethsemane, He was in anguish. He knew fear in its cruellest and most visible form: sweat like drops of blood. Jesus was truly, wholly man.

74

My family goes one way; I go another. I'll tell you the truth: I would never choose to do what must now be done. If I were in control, if "Self" were on the throne, I would never park myself outside an operating room, and wait for strangers to come for me. Doing this for someone else would be absurd! Jesus went to the cross of His own free will. When they took Him outside the city gate, He knew what was about to hap-

pen. Still, He voluntarily chose to go! I lie here on my back, half shaved, half unshaved; He with nails, driven home in mock justice. "They" come in and put a funny little hat on my head, so that I now look like one of Phyllis Diller's characters. The nurse explains, "We don't want you to contaminate yourself." I have no intention of doing such a thing, nor do I even imagine myself to be capable of it. Now that I have this hat, I certainly feel protected! Far be it from me to contaminate the situation! If "Self" is in control here, he is certainly doing a terrible job. I remember that when Jesus went to the cross, they put a crown on His head. No, I'm not like Jesus; but when they put that thorny crown on His head, He was alone, too. He had to stand there by Himself. Is it hard for you to see Jesus in humiliation? Do you turn away?

75

Can you imagine the thoughts that must have rushed through His head? I'm sure that God provided for Him, keeping fear down for Him as He was now doing for me. Time is

passing, and "show time" is almost upon us. Operating rooms are very strange places: so extraordinarily bright. Here, my future will be decided. There are technicians everywhere. It's as if I'm in a "M.A.S.H." episode. Everyone is walking around with their hands in the air. (They have obviously heard the "contamination" story.) A smile passes over my face; I am happy. They don't want to contaminate me, either. Thank God, fear has not entered the picture at this point. The technicians begin to do their work, and I find myself saying, "God, You had better come close." The reality is starting to take hold. I have the feeling I've written the story plot, for I know the next move, and the next.

Someone dressed in green steps into my field of vision. By now, the medication is beginning to take hold. Everything begins to take on a dream effect. Time slows to a crawl. The green image is the male nurse assigned to me. He says to me, "You know, it's a good idea for us to be sure we've got the

right man, that we're going to do the right operation on the right part of your body. So, I want to ask you some questions. Is your name Reverend Richard Girard?" ("Yes, my name is Richard Girard, but—") "And I see you're a 'reverend'; that's really neat!" ("You need to understand that I'm really a gospel preacher with the Church of Christ. I'm a minister, but you need not call me 'reverend.'") You see, when their computer identified me for the hospital records, it described me as "Richard Girard, MIN." No one understood what "MIN." meant 77 ("minister"); everybody knows what a "reverend" is. From that point on, everything I own has a sticker on it that says "Rev. Richard Girard." The man's next question: "Who did you say you preach for?" Well, what gospel preacher do you know who would miss an opportunity like that to start telling the Good News about Jesus Christ? That's exactly what I start to do. After about five minutes I suddenly realize that God has just provided another way to lessen my anxiety. I don't have to be afraid.

Unseen, someone places a small attachment on the side of the operating table and straps my right arm down. A voice says, "We need to tell you what we're going to do. Until we get to a certain point in the procedure, there is absolutely nothing that we can give you to help you to stay calm. We need for you to be coherent, we need for you to move in certain ways, and we need to have you stay alert." Another technician enters. I don't like being strapped down; I get claustrophobic. (You may know from experience how difficult it can be to deal with claustrophobia: the intense dread of being in a closed in or narrow space.) As they put the big strap around my wrist, I think: "I can still hit 'em with the other one, if the need arises. He doesn't know I'm left-handed. I'm not so bad off." Now these are not the thoughts of a Christian. I don't like to even think about such things. In my defense, I credit it to the pre-medication, and not to the re-emergence of the old sinful personality. The voice continues speaking: "Reverend Girard, I'm going to have to strap your left arm down.

That's okay, isn't it, Reverend? Who do you preach for, anyway?"

This man wasn't in the room the last time I was asked that question, so I tell him the same gospel story all over again. God does provide for His own, doesn't He? Praise the Lord. I hate to admit this, but I am not even thinking about my wife, my children, or any of my family. I'm not thinking about what they might be doing, or even about what I am doing. I am a gospel preacher with a captive audience. The apostle Paul once said that it doesn't really matter who does the planting, the watering, or the harvesting; he was just a man who went around planting seeds, but God is the one who really causes things to grow. I think to myself, "Well, things have got to grow in Cleveland, Ohio, right?" God is providing a way, at this very moment, here in this operating room—and I am that way! I am totally involved, and I don't have to deal with any fear. Here I am, both arms strapped down, technicians

telling me what they are going to do. I am helpless—like a sheep led to the

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My mind goes again to Jesus as He was about to be crucified. He was alone. I am not trying to be irreverent, but it occurs to me that someone could have said, "Jesus, You lie down with Your head on this X. It's my job to do certain things, one of them having to do with these nails. They have to be driven into Your hands. It will be necessary that You not move while we do this. It will hurt somewhat." Someone had to do this sort of thing, though if any courtesy or respect was shown to Jesus, it was probably in mockery. We might think of such a person as an "execution technician." But somebody certainly had this type of job to do there at Calvary. Jesus lay down and extended His arms. He opened His hands and waited. He knew what was to come.

He knew the imminent pain, yet He waited. What went through His mind? Can we even begin to imagine? Infinite power to crush,

to judge, and to destroy—restrained. It was sufficient to know; there was no need to display His might. His mission was to do the will of His Father in heaven, and Jesus was certain His Father was watching. God would be pleased with His Son. His glory would come from His Father. “Not My will, but Yours be done.”

Do you understand the peace that Jesus must have received from His heavenly Father in order to submit to this? It is a peace that passes understanding. Even for Jesus, this was not the time to try and understand the Father. It was not the time to investigate what believing in God the Father was all about. It was not the time to wonder whether He would continue to trust in what His Father was telling Him. And it certainly was not the time for Him to deal with a “faith crisis”: to wonder whether He had any, to ask whether the promises of the Father were really for Him. Knowing how it was for Jesus, why should it not be the same for you and me? If we can't apply

what we've learned, have we really gained anything?

So here I am, with both hands tied down. "Dick, it's necessary for us to strap your legs down." So they did. Mine, they strapped; Jesus', they nailed. But God provided for Him, as He is providing for me. I am living the dreaded day, and yet there is such peace that I cannot find words to describe it or explain it to you. All I can say is that I know God is in control. Thank God, He reveals His power in my weakness.

82

No fear, by the grace of God: how strange to think of such things at a time like this! On second thought, how perfectly right to think of such things at a time like this: God doing what only God can do; peace that defies understanding; living the "truth of the gospel." God does not live only in the gathering of the whole church for worship services. God lives in the company of believers, but He also resides within the heart of the submissive saint. As a believer, I

have faith in a God who has given His very best for me. I believe God would have sent His Son even if I were the only one who would believe in Him. How could I believe anything less? How could you?

One of the nurses says, "Dick, what are you thinking about? Were you praying? You know, a lot of people come in here, and they will pray. They will pray so hard and so fast that the tears will be running down the sides of their faces. No atheists in fox-holes.' I tell you, I never see an atheist in an operating room, either. Many people pray really hard. They think their prayers will be answered, so they pray to a God who is going to take care of them. But they pray to a God they really don't know. They pray, hoping He is able, hoping He can do what He says He can do. But the relationship is just not there." It occurs to me that I haven't consciously prayed yet.

83

Let's back up a little now. I've been thinking about Jesus; about the crown of thorns on

His head; about His hands being nailed to that cross. I've been thinking that He had to have been thinking during His whole ordeal: knowing that God had been providing for Him, giving Him inner peace. (That's where the peace comes from; it comes from inside.) Jesus is my example. So here I am, thinking about Jesus, and I don't have any fear in my body. Sure sounds like praying to me.... The show is about to begin. The crew calls it "The Show"; they call themselves "The Crew."

84 Why shouldn't I?

I told you this would be my testimony. I don't really know how long testimonies are supposed to be. I came in today to share it with you, two weeks after my fourth "Big Show." I brought one passage that I wanted to read to you from my favorite book, the Bible. I believe my entire life is based in Psalm 16. I will only read one verse, but if you ever want to know what I'm really about, what I really believe, what I stand

*for, and who I am, just read Psalm 16.
Here is the verse:*

*I have set the LORD always before
me. Because he is at my right hand,
I will not be shaken.⁴⁶*

*The events in my life on February 13, 1990
didn't depend on luck. You see, I don't
believe in luck. I don't believe in fortune
tellers. I don't believe we should consult
"palm readers." I don't think we need to
worry about astrology. Let me share a little
bit of personal insight on "luck." My first
surgery took place on my sister-in-law's
birthday. Does that sound pretty lucky? It
didn't work; I had to have it done again.
My second time was scheduled for the day
before my daughter's birthday: a bit closer
to home. That wasn't as lucky as it could
have been. My odds needed to improve
dramatically. For my third surgery, I hired
an Irish doctor and had the operation on*

⁴⁶ Ps. 16:8.

Saint Patrick's Day! That should have been lucky, right? My fourth "lucky day" fell on the thirteenth of the month of February—the day before Valentine's Day. My "heart day" would come a day earlier than the traditional one! So much for "lady luck"!

The show is now about to begin; I have mentally rehearsed my Scripture passage repeatedly. Nothing new is happening here, except the absence of all fear! God has provided for me, praise His name!

86 *The doctor says, "Dick, I want you to open your eyes really wide for me, okay?" He squirts something into my eyes, and all vision disappears. I can't see a thing. "I just put some salve in your eyes. We have found that some people open their eyes under anesthesia, and their eyes dry out. Now we use salve to prevent that."*

Is "Self" doing a good job? If "Self" is in control here, I'm hurting. I'm tied down. My eyes are covered; I can't see a thing. My situation is totally beyond my control.

Yet, I'm thinking about Jesus. I'm meditating on the Twenty-third Psalm:

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me....⁴⁷

"Thank you, God, for being in control. I'd be doing a terrible job of it by myself." I'm not trying to be funny; I'm stating the sober truth. Jesus provides. My part of this show is almost through; if fear is going to come, it had better hurry up because they're about 87 to give me an injection that will transport me to parts and places unknown.

I just have time for a couple of quick thoughts. Paul's words to the Galatians come to mind (I don't know from where):

⁴⁷ Ps. 23:4.

*See what large letters I use as I
write to you with my own hand!* ⁴⁸

*I remember reading or hearing somewhere
that Paul may have had an eye problem; I
could relate to that now! I also remember
that he prayed to the Lord three times that
his “thorn in the flesh” might be removed,
but Jesus answered:*

*“My grace is sufficient for you, for
my power is made perfect in weak-
ness.”* ⁴⁹

88

*Thank you, Lord. I needed to remember that
passage. Your grace is sufficient. I'm glad
you're taking care of me. If Paul ever went
to Laodicea (the financial and medical
capital of the world in his day), I wonder
whether he went there seeking his own cure?
They had an eye salve there that was world*

⁴⁸ Gal. 6:11.

⁴⁹ 2 Cor. 12:9.

famous. Jesus alludes to it in His letter of rebuke to the Laodcean church:

*"I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see."*⁵⁰

Do you think that perhaps Paul might have bought just one little jar of that salve in Laodcea? Here I am in the Cleveland Clinic Foundation, one of the major medical centers in the world—a modern Laodcea. I wonder if Paul could see better than I can now? 89

My thoughts are peaceful as my mind reflects on the words of the psalmist: "...and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever." It was then that this preacher went to sleep in the arms of Jesus his Savior, with-

⁵⁰ Rev. 3:19.

out a fear in the world, without a care. I had done my homework; I had listened to those lessons I had preached, and I had applied them. Christians talk about “knowing God.” We talk about believing, trusting, having faith.

*And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*⁵¹

- 90 *This peace can also be yours as a Christian. That's what I have to offer you today—or, rather, what Jesus is offering you through my testimony. My invitation is for my brothers and sisters in Christ, urging all to seek, touch, and taste the essence of God. My invitation is for people who don't know Jesus. You can know Him, at least as well as this physically broken preacher, who can rejoice even when his heart is breaking. My gift is this testimony in praise to a loving*

⁵¹ Phil. 4:7.

God. My story may have seemed long and slow and dull to some; it is all about the time when my turn came to face the fear, looking into the jaws of death. But your day may be just around the corner. When your back's against the wall, what will you do? Will you face the crisis in the peace of God, or in the cold chill of lonely fear? Think about it!

*If only for the moment,
my heart yearns for You,*

O God—

I have lived in vain.

But I believe!

*I place my trust in Your
loving hands,
and rest myself in peace.*

*I know in my heart,
my trust will prevail forever
in You.*

*For what alternative is left
for me?*

*Who but You, O Lord,
will save my soul,
and give me life eternal? ⁵²*

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