

## **Chapter 4 My First Trip Home and Back**

### **A Sovereign Financial Provision**

Almost a year and a half had passed since I had been home, and my desire to spend time with my family and to share the gospel with them had increased. But I wasn't sure how I was going to pay for the trip because I only had about a hundred dollars. One Sunday morning, I was led to write a note and put it on a bulletin board in the English-speaking church. John and I worshiped there on the weekend to take a break from our missionary work. As I sat in a chair in one of the small fellowship rooms and wrote a note, I sensed someone looking over my shoulder.

"What are you doing?"

"I am writing a note to put on the bulletin board to see if I can catch a ride to the U.S. I was told that sometimes missionaries drive back and forth."

"My family and I are going back to the States for a furlough."

"Really, when?"

He was leaving the same date I planned to leave.

"How much would you charge me?"

"How does a hundred dollars sound?"

This was one of those divinely orchestrated circumstances I frequently enjoyed as a new believer in Christ. But I still had one critical question. He could be headed anywhere in the U.S., and it might be hundreds of miles from my intended destination.

"Where are you going?"

He smiled. "Joplin, Missouri."

I was stunned. Joplin was just 60 miles from Springfield, Missouri: my destination. My heart praised God and I was filled with joy.

We left a month later. I had decided to fast during the trip to prepare my heart and because I really didn't have the extra funds to eat. This family of four had already accepted the inconvenience of another person in their vehicle, and I did not want to be any more of a burden. I did help with driving, given the 54-hour trip from Guatemala. When we reached Texas, we visited one of the churches that supported the missionary family I was traveling with, and they received a \$1000 donation. I no longer had to pay anything, so I broke the fast. We arrived in Joplin about 11 p.m. on the third day, and my dad was waiting for me there to take me the final

60 miles. I remember that night, that hug from my father, that hour driving back home with him after serving my Lord for almost two years.

### **My First Sovereign Fellowship**

I enjoyed American food, comfort, and my wonderful large family – and I found ways to share the good news with each of them again. Thanks to my father I had acquired many construction skills which provided plenty of finances during my stay. I listened to preachers on the radio or cassettes as I worked.

One Wednesday evening I was feeling lonely and needed encouragement. I learned quickly why God wants us to stay connected. We find life and strength from His family so we can continue to be poured out and represent Him well.

I decided to go to a large denominational church near my parent's home. Jehovah Jireh, my provider, was ready and waiting. As I parked my car, a man walked in my direction to greet me. *What an incredible place I thought.* Before I could get out, he extended his hand and smiled.

“Welcome!” he said.

By his pronunciation, I knew he was someone we, in education, call “special.” But as is the case of many, his sincerity, joy, and enthusiasm was authentic and encouraging. As he walked with me, he invited me to sit with him and his friends.

I accepted.

As we entered the sanctuary, he led me to the second floor balcony where a group of twenty other people with similar childlike enthusiasm were seated closely together. It was a rather large venue, with plenty of room on the first floor, but as I learned after the service started, my new friends enjoyed fellowshiping as much as listening to a sermon. They were far enough away not to be distracting to others.

Once they found out I was a missionary, I became the center of their attention. They wanted my address and some gave me theirs. They wanted me to write to them. They loved Jesus in a very simple, uncomplicated way. I do not remember what was preached that night, nor did I meet any of the non-special people on the first floor. However, I will never forget how my brothers and sisters in Christ loved me and sent me on my way, full of God! I look forward to seeing them again in eternity.

## Steve's Story

With only a couple of weeks left in the States, I drove to Kansas City to visit the last of my family, and to share the gospel with them. My first stop would be to my grandmother. We called her Mama. A few minutes after arriving, she began to tell me what had happened to my older brother, Steve. His wife had left him, and he was crushed.

From a very young age, people recognized something very special about Steve. I was the black sheep of eight children who some thought would end up in prison, but Steve was going to be a priest.

When Steve's second marriage ended, he told me he had considered ending his life, so my heart was torn with grief when I heard his third marriage was coming to an end.

That's when the Holy Spirit spoke.

"Go find your brother!"

Steve had supposedly gone to our family cabin on Table Rock Lake. To find him, I would have to turn around and go back the exact same route I had just spent three and a half hours driving, plus another hour to the cabin – just thirty minutes after arriving at Mama's. It sounded irrational.

But the Holy Spirit spoke again but this time with a more urgent tone.

"Go find your brother!"

So, with a little hesitation I got back in my car and returned, interceding on Steve's behalf much of the way.

I arrived after dark to a cabin without any lights on. My brother's truck was there, but he did not come out to greet me. When you are inside the cabin you can easily hear a car coming down the gravel road as it approaches. I searched the cabin inside and the grounds outside, but couldn't find any trace of him. Worry and fear entered my heart. Would I find him alive?

The neighbors were out on their front porch, so I asked them if they had seen Steve. They had seen him much earlier but they weren't sure where he was at the moment. That just left one more place to look: the boat dock.

As I made the 100-yard journey, my fears increased as I saw no lights, nor heard any sounds of life. What would I find? As I took my first step onto the catwalk leading to the dock I called out.

"Steve? Are you here?"

Several seconds passed.

“Yes”, said a voice from a part of the dock that was hidden by storage closets.

As I approached him sitting in a chair overlooking the lake he said, “I knew you were coming!”

“What? You knew I was coming! What do you mean?”

He described his trip to the lake as one full of weeping and brokenness because his heart had been crushed yet again. Suicide was on his mind. As he got closer to the cabin, he began crying out to God for help and he said an unexplainable peace came over him. He knew I was going to come. The sovereignty of God had set up a divine appointment and a messenger was on his way.

With some of the money I had earned in construction, I had already purchased beautiful Bibles for Steve and my dad. I even had their names engraved on them. I handed Steve his new Bible and instructed him to read John and Romans. We spent the entire weekend talking about Jesus before he returned to Kansas City.

A week or so later he called.

“What’s up, brother?”

My heart was happy, but confused. This wasn’t a typical greeting for him. He told me that he had just walked down an aisle in a large church by his home and given his heart to Jesus! Steve had become a priest – a priest of the Most High! A cord of two was formed between us and Steve would become my greatest encourager, supporter and primary source of fellowship whenever I was home.

The time had come to return to Guatemala. I purchased a compact pick-up that was mechanically sound, but sported some rust in its wheel wells. It had a camper shell that would come in handy. I had placed a newspaper ad for a video projector, and secured one that was three feet by three feet in size. It was going to be the perfect mechanism for showing a copy of the Jesus film I had purchased after hearing how ministries were using it around the world with great results.

### **My First Time Driving Alone**

This would be my first trip across Mexico by myself and I suspected my faith would be challenged many times.

My first challenge came about eight hours after entering Mexico. I had made a wrong turn and ended up in the downtown area of a large port city, Tampico. After many attempts to get back to the right road, I found my way to a line of cars waiting for a ferry boat that would take me across a bay that might get me back on course.

My Spanish was much better by then, but I had a long way to go to understand everything said to me. It took me many trips between the U.S. and Guatemala before I would learn the difference between the words *derecho* and *derecha*. One word means to turn right and the other is slang for go straight. You can imagine how much trouble that one letter could cause someone who was traveling 1,500 miles across a country with virtually no road signs in those days. I am sure those two words had something to do with why I was sitting in a line waiting for a ferry.

Anyway, wondering if the overloaded boat would sink during the voyage, I finally made it to the other side and back onto the right highway.

### **Greatest Corruption Challenge**

I breathed a sigh of relief. I had lost almost half a day of traveling, but I had cleared a huge hurdle. But my relief didn't last long. After getting a little rest and food, I drew the attention of a police officer after I supposedly made an illegal left turn.

I had become accustomed to both the subtle and overt attempts of bribery. The most challenging to my faith was when I was in the middle of vast stretches of desert-like terrain, with no living object in sight. Normally, the police would be coming from the opposite direction and had to make a U-turn to reach me once they saw my US plates. As they flashed their lights, I always tried to find a farmer who was tilling his ground, or a group of people who were waiting for a bus before I finally pulled over. I believed that having witnesses would reduce the likelihood of something much more serious occurring.

I was most frightened when police pursed me in an unmarked car. I always surmised they had stolen it from some innocent traveler. Some have learned that angry shouts or a drawn gun can extract a lot of money from people. I have learned that faith in a righteous God who hates injustice is more powerful than evil and that you do not have to pay bribes!

This time the officer convinced me I had made an illegal turn. He wanted \$150 for my mistake, which was a good part of my traveling money. I refused. His anger increased and he commanded that I pull off to a side street where we were isolated. He upped the ante and said I

would be going to jail until I could be taken before a judge Monday morning. This happened to be a Friday morning. This was the biggest hand I had played out of the numerous times I had been stopped. I took a big gulp, knowing I would spend the next three days in a Mexican jail.

“I will have to do that then because I was not going to pay the \$150.” You would have thought I had just called his mother a whore.

He became irate, but I was resolved. I think he also realized he had lost other possible income from drivers who missed the same no-left-turn sign I supposedly missed. He sent me on my way with some colorful words and angry hand gestures. God had won. My heart was strengthened and supported by the grace that comes through righteous choices and standing against injustice!

### **A Costly Missed Turn**

The next day, I made another costly mistake by missing a right turn in the middle of nowhere. Thirty years ago, there were usually no traffic signs before or at a crossroad. I believe the reason was because I was passing one of the many semi-tractors that were pulling double fifty-three foot long trailers at the exact location where I needed to turn. A hundred miles later, when I began to enter hairpin-mountainous terrain, I realized something was wrong. After a quick look at my map, I knew I could continue an hour or so to the next crossroad, which would lead me back to the correct highway.

It was starting to get dark as I made my way back down the Pikes Peak-like route. I had lost another four or five hours, stopping several times for directions. My system for getting back on the right road when I was lost was to ask at least two or more different people. As soon as I got a match I would do my best to interpret and follow what was said.

### **Mechanical Problems**

Peace entered my heart because I was pretty sure I was headed in the right direction. I did not get to enjoy those thoughts very long though, because my head lights began to dim. I am a decent mechanic, so I knew something was going wrong with the charging system. I stopped, quickly checked under the hood, and found nothing. Without

any electrical measuring tools, I was unable to make more than a guess. However, I was sure the battery was going dead, and I was a hundred miles from the closest town in an extremely mountainous region. The nearest tow truck was probably a couple hundred miles away and finding a part for an American car was probably two weeks away.

If voltage dropped too much, the ignition system would fail and the car would stop. I had a very expensive projector and other valuable things that would become vulnerable to theft if I had to hitchhike, which made me anxious. A few minutes later the thought came to me that if I would drive without my lights on I could easily make it another hour, maybe even two! So the adventure continued.

I am sure I startled more than a few Mexicans as I flashed my now barely visible headlights only for a second to warn oncoming traffic on the narrow two lane road that I was coming. I followed a slow moving semi for some time, allowing him to forge a path in the darkness. I eventually decided to pass him because time was against me, and he was moving way too slowly.

Somehow, I made my way to civilization. My feelings of relief were overwhelming as I pulled into a motel. I should have been back in Guatemala already, but God wanted to teach me that all things work together for good. That day's lesson had ended. I had made it to food and shelter and collapsed into a board-like mattress from sheer exhaustion. Oh how I slept!

The next morning, I opened the hood with a rested and calm heart. Within a minute, I discovered that a bolt on the tensioner of the new alternator I had purchased had come loose. Five minutes later, I had the vehicle repaired and ready to go.

### **Customs Takes Equipment**

By midday, I reached the Guatemala-Mexico border. Customs forced me to take the projector and some other things I had purchased to a facility in Guatemala City. A government agent traveled with me. After unloading the valuables in a warehouse, I was allowed to head to the farm where the men and John were waiting. I was extremely happy the trip was over and I was back home with my Christian family.