

Reflections by the Pond

THE WRITINGS OF DAVID S LAMPEL



Bright Moments

Life-changing Points in Time

For thus says the high and exalted One
Who lives forever, whose name is Holy,
"I dwell on a high and holy place,
And also with the contrite and lowly of spirit
In order to revive the spirit of the lowly
And to revive the heart of the contrite."

Isaiah 57:15

Human life is a journey—a fascinating, tragic, adventurous, joyous, inspiring, torturous, rewarding, confusing journey.

One purpose of this variegated existence is for us to be better today than we were yesterday, to be better tomorrow than we were today. To become better, we must daily digest the episodes of this temporal life, to observe, to mentally record, to draw lessons from the endless moments through which we pass.

For the disciple of Christ this process takes on a cosmic importance. For the Christian does not just want to be a better version of himself, he wants to be more like his Lord. It is the principal occupation of every believer to improve, to grow and mature in his relationship and service to Christ.

It is called “sanctification.”

Part of the process of maturing, and becoming increasingly like Christ, is to pay attention to and learn from the bright moments that occur in every life. These are milestones, events that linger with us long afterwards, incidents that keep us awake at night, replaying in a loop.

These bright moments teach, if we care to learn.



Without a doubt it was a peculiar decision for a seventeen-year-old to make just months before heading off to four years in the navy during the Vietnam War. But my friend and I had been touched by the presentation by a missionary to Galeana, Mexico in the Sunday evening service of our church. On a previous summer that same friend and I had been part of a youth group visiting the Galeana area for about a week. This time he and I made plans to spend our entire summer in the small mountainous town, working with the established team there to minister to the smaller peasant villages in the area.

To that end we purchased an aging, woe-begone bread truck and set to preparing it to be our home for the several months we would be in Mexico.

Some time during their later youth or very early adulthood, most people get their first taste of the cynical world that exists beyond their protected childhood. I got mine on that missionary trip to Mexico.

I would not impugn the motives of those in charge; surely they were devoted to serving the kingdom of Christ. After a while, however, their decisions and actions seemed at variance with what they had presented that Sunday evening to our church, and I became increasingly troubled. After a conversation about it with one of the leaders, I remained troubled, and while everyone else was inside the building for an evening service, I retired to our old bread truck to seek the will of the Lord.

Though it was fifty-two years ago, I still

remember the tortured anguish with which I cried out to the Lord. Should I remain where I was, serving in spite of my misgivings? Was I wrong? Was it just cheap teenage angst? Should I just grow up and tough it out? Or was God indeed calling me away from that for which my friend and I had prepared so long?

On my knees I prayed and prayed; for more than an hour I poured out my heart to God, seeking His will in the matter, seeking not just *an* answer, but His. My anguish and confusion filled the back of that truck like a thick, heavy cloud, but the same space also seemed to be super-charged by the Spirit, by heaven itself.

And then, I was no longer alone.

Through the haze of my uncertainty, before me was a vision of Jesus Himself. I won't pretend it was something akin to what John experienced on the island of Patmos, or Paul, being "caught up to the third heaven"; I won't pretend it was anything more than what my tortured mind had conjured on its own. It was no apparition, no ghost conjured by religious ecstasy. Neither was it the Savior in bodily form. It was, instead, the Spirit of Christ come to comfort in such tangible power as to seem that His presence filled the space. With Paul I could say,

...whether in the body I do not know,
or out of the body I do not know,
God knows...

2 Corinthians 12:2

Jesus, in this vision, did not speak, but in the confines of that prayer closet I sensed His unmistakable compassion, His tender love, His unbounded grace. Jesus was as real to me in that moment as I imagine He ever could be this side of the Rapture.

Even then, in the throes of passionate prayer, I knew that what I was seeing through closed eyelids was really emanating from the confines of my own heart, releasing, in more tactile form, the Spirit of Christ dwelling there.

In my moment of pain and lonely indecision, my Savior came to me, and in Christ's compassionate embrace I found peace—and the answer to my youthful uncertainty.

For all of the half-century that followed, that bright moment has been a part of my life. Ask me if Jesus—as Savior, as Brother, as Advocate and Friend—is real, and I will give you an unequivocal answer. Ask me if I know He lives, and I will tell you with unwavering certainty, *Yes, Christ Jesus lives, and His love for those who call upon His name endures forever.* ☞

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Hebrews 4:14-16

Prayer pulls the rope below and the great bell rings above in the ears of God. Some scarcely stir the bell, for they pray so languidly. Others give but an occasional pluck at the rope. But he who wins with heaven is the man who grasps the rope boldly and pulls continuously, with all his might.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon



For most people today, life is a blur. The tragedy is that it is, for the most part, a self-imposed blur. No one is forced at gunpoint to become a slave to social media, a carnivorous beast that has evolved into one of the most anti-social inventions of all time. No one is tricked into doing twenty things at once: driving the car while listening to music while chatting on the phone while answering a text while checking e-mail while... We choose to participate, hence we choose to live a harried, fractured, and insubstantial life.

To be fair, some of us have demanding, high-pressure jobs that inflict a similar fried-brain effect that is not at all caused by an intimate relationship with Twitter or Facebook. Just as demanding as the job of a manager of a company can be the job of managing a household with small children, preparing, serving, and cleaning up twenty-nine meals every day.

Yet, with rare exception, we choose the life we have, and it is up to each of us to manage our time that life is more than just a mind-numbing blur.

If, at the end of a day, we feel frazzled, fried, pulled like taffy into eight different directions, we mostly have only ourselves to blame.

Our life as a whole, like its component parts, is a gift from God. What we choose to do with that life manifests the devotion and thanksgiving we offer back to Him. When we purposely climb aboard the bullet train that is today's electronic culture, when we even in the more analog portion of this world skip lightly across its communicative surface, we deprive ourselves of the opportunity—and, sadly, more often than not the inclination—to recognize and cherish life's bright moments.

The *reason* for my trip through the air, including the direction of my travel, now escapes me (after all, *some* things are meaningless to memory). But the layover in the middle of the trip was in Las Vegas, Nevada. Though it was not my first time in that city, it was my first time in its airport. At that relatively young age I was impressed by the palatial and technologically advanced aspects of the airport: I had never before seen *multi-colored* listings for flight information!

One indicator that you are in Las Vegas is that there are (at least the last time I was there) slot machines in just about every building in the city. Washing your clothes at

the laundromat? Slot machines. Filling your car with gas? Slot machines. Grocery store? Slot machines. Waiting for a connecting flight? Slot machines.

At a time when there were far fewer restrictions on where one could enjoy a cigarette, I quickly found myself waiting for my connecting flight at the appropriate gate, in a smaller, yet still huge by my lights, waiting area filled with people, clouded by cigarette smoke and, of course, replete with slot machines.

It was loud and oppressive. It was claustrophobic. I frantically searched for a vacant corner in which to endure this cacophonous hell on earth until my flight was called. With my back to the wall in the furthest corner I could find, I silently screamed, "God help me!"

Only then did I notice a young black man in the press of people. I don't recall his face, I don't know who he was or why he was there, but for me he was God's answer to my urgent prayer. For on the back of his

jacket were emblazoned the words in arching, bold letters, "King Jesus."

At once an enveloping peace overwhelmed me. I was no longer alone. A brother in Christ was near. And that was sufficient.

At times one of the hallmarks of God's grace is the feather-light touch with which He administers it. No symphony of angels, no battalions of soldiers to rescue the embattled saint. Just a quiet reminder that the child of God is never far from His presence. ❧

The Lord is righteous in all His ways
 And kind in all His deeds.
 The Lord is near to all who call upon
 Him,
 To all who call upon Him in truth.
 He will fulfill the desire of those who
 fear Him;
 He will also hear their cry and will
 save them.

Psalms 145:17-19

*In heav'nly love abiding,
 No change my heart shall fear;
 And safe is such confiding,
 For nothing changes here.
 The storm may roar without me,
 My heart may low be laid,
 But God is round about me,
 And can I be dismayed?*

*Wherever He may guide me,
 No want shall turn me back;
 My shepherd is beside me,
 And nothing can I lack.
 His wisdom ever waketh;
 His sight is never dim.
 He knows the way He taketh,
 And I will walk with Him.*

*Green pastures are before me,
 Which yet I have not seen;
 Bright skies will soon be o'er me,
 Where darkest clouds have been.
 My hope I cannot measure;
 My path to life is free;
 My Savior has my treasure,
 And He will walk with me.*

Anna Laetitia Waring



The Rescue

At times the Lord answers with a whisper, or a gentle, reassuring hand on our shoulder. These instances we remember and treasure for His grace, his generous condescension. They are bright moments we tuck away for those times we have failed Him, and we cry out for Him to once again respond in His singular mercy and kindness.

At other times, however, the Lord answers like a disemboweling shiv to our gut.

After returning from Vietnam, and shortly after Linda and I were married in March of 1971, I became the youth choir director at a Baptist church in San Diego. The memory is a bit hazy about what happened after that brief stint (it was, after all, fifty years ago), but at some point this born-and-raised Christian—who walked the aisle at the tender age of seven—began a slow slide into rebellion against God. There are probably nicer words, less condemnatory words, but this one is the most accurate. It wasn't bla-

tant, aggressive apostasy, just a meandering apathy toward righteousness—permitting more of the world into my life than Christ and His Spirit. We stopped attending church, and I became more intent on becoming a photographer than on becoming what God wanted me to be.

In the course of becoming and being a fashion photographer in Southern California, I met and became fast friends with a fellow photog. We worked in different areas of the field but came together and joined with others in an effort to raise the acceptance of our profession as a fine art.

Throughout this period my mom, back in the Midwest, periodically sent me cassette tapes of her pastor's sermons. The Spirit had not yet given me up for lost, so I appreciated Mom's thoughtfulness, and even listened to a few of the tapes.

One day my friend and fellow photog was at our house. As he was leaving he caught site of a collection of these sermon tapes sitting on the end-table next to the

door and said, “Oh, are you a Christian?”

Immediately the Lord’s shiv plunged into me, down to my very soul.

I didn’t have to wait and ponder what had just occurred; I didn’t have to retire and pray about it. My friend’s remark was still echoing in the room when I immediately understood the import of what had just been revealed. He and I had spent considerable time together, yet he had no idea that I was a Christian. As I closed the door behind him I was overwhelmed by a wave of nauseating guilt. That simple question exposed my hypocrisy, my laziness in permitting so much of the world to take over my life, my cowardly unwillingness to stand for my Lord and Savior.

Indeed, my recent behavior revealed that Jesus Christ may have been my Savior, but I did not consider Him to be my Lord.

“My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand. I and the Father are one.”

John 10:27-30

Christ could have gently prodded me back into His embrace, as He did in the Las Vegas airport. He could have reached out to me in understanding yet supernatural reassurance, as He did in the back of that bread

truck in Mexico. He could have reaffirmed my relationship to Him in myriad other ways. But *this* time Christ Jesus, the Good Shepherd, wielded His “rod and staff” to correct, to convict, to impel repentance.

Even though I walk through the valley
of the shadow of death,
I fear no evil, for You are with me;
Your rod and Your staff, they comfort
me.

Psalm 23:4

God’s “comfort” is not always pleasant. If necessary that shepherd’s crook will yank us by the neck to get us back in line, back to the safety of the flock. For if we do indeed belong to Him, He will *keep* us; if He has to come looking for us, to grab us by the scruff of the neck, He will. That is part of His deep and enduring love for us. And some times, for our own good, His love hurts.

I thank God; I thank Christ Jesus; I thank the convicting Holy Spirit, who never left me even when I ignored Him, that I felt the sharp blade of his knife in my gut that day. I thank God for the pain. I thank God for the debilitating anguish over my rebellion. I thank God and His Christ that they never gave up on me.

It was a bright moment indeed, the day my Good Shepherd drew me back into the fold. It was the beginning of it all—of all that has transpired since. It was the turning point—not to a sinless life, but to a life, in all its transient imperfections, devoted without reservation to the Lord. ☸

Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.

Jude 1:24-25