

Questions to Ponder

1. Do I oscillate between driven achievement and some form of mind numbing private escape?
2. Do I claim that God set me free *for me or for himself*?
3. If my life were a concert, would my audience say that I am playing through the rests?
4. Have I had my Copernican Revolution?

Chapter 4

Rest, the Pleasure of His Perspective

I Please God by Embracing His Perspective

The LORD said, “Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.” Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. 12 After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper.

(I Kings 19:11-12)

C. S. Lewis observed, “As long as you are proud, you cannot know God. A proud man is always looking down on things and people: and of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you.”²⁴

“Our lives can become messy, a fog can roll in so thick that we can’t see even one step ahead. Special guidance may be called for. There are times

when it's good to ask a wise person to turn his or her chair toward us, to look deeply into our hearts, to help us gain perspective, to see what we're too blind to see, and to uncover what in our self-deceiving ways we hide from ourselves."²⁵

THE LOSS OF PERSPECTIVE

When Lois and I planted a church, it taxed my reserves more than any other life experience. We made the commitment to do so during my last quarter of seminary. We were able to commute to and from our future home nearly every weekend. Seven families and two single men had committed monthly financial support to the potential church. That was enough to secure our meager salary. Only six families were planning to make the fledgling group their church home, and one of them was transferred to another state before we moved to the community. Lois and I soon felt like pioneers in our own country.

The first year I discovered that most of the people who had once expressed an interest in planting a church had shifted their attention to their teenagers. The advantages of established churches with youth pastors and well-run youth ministries overruled the adventures of church planting. Naturally they declined the offer to be part of the church plant and settled into their familiar churches.

The second year erupted like a volcano as conflicting agendas surfaced like hot lava rushing down a mountainside. After two years I admitted that it was only by God's grace that Grace Evangelical Free Church had survived.

We rebounded the third year recovering from some attendance loss due to the previous year of conflict . I personally recovered from a physical breakdown caused in part from the year of conflict . I discovered I could potentially work and worry myself to death, and I learned to value rest by

experiencing what happens when I go without it for an extended period of time.

The fourth and fifth years of the church provided steady numerical growth. The spiritual development of young families was remarkable. Most of the congregation had not been raised in Christian homes. Many had become believers during their college years and were clueless as to how to establish a Christian home. Being raised in Christian homes was a huge advantage for Lois and me. Despite the narrow differences in age, we were like spiritual parents to them. These families became especially dear to us.

Year six challenged Grace Evangelical Free Church to once again live within its name. Stepping out in faith, the congregation broke ground and began building a church building that would fit its purposes. Building projects are notorious for making or breaking churches. Had the congregation known what would transpire shortly after signing the building contract, they may not have broken ground. The building was not the problem; it was leadership.

Just as the congregation took the giant step, young professionals who had been successful in their first jobs were promoted. That word usually meant transfer.

Many of the promotions came without an option to stay in the area, since entire departments were being transferred to other cities. The unemployment rate in the area would soon exceed twenty percent. These were the bright, young Christians that had developed into church leaders, deacons, potential elders and lots of faithful workers. Most tragic was the moral failure of our church chairman, which took place as the building was being constructed. The ranks of leadership were greatly reduced.

Six weeks after moving into the new facility our building committee chairman (not the same person who was in moral failure) pulled me aside after an evening service. He proceeded to ask me an all-too-familiar question, “Do you have a moment?” I had become gun-shy of the all-too-familiar conversation that followed, but for some reason I was ambushed this time. Brian and I had communicated nearly every day during the design and construction phases. With a solid Christian background, engineering, finance, and communication skills, he was the one leader I couldn’t do without. Besides, Brian was my hunting buddy and we had just been out pheasant hunting the day before. *Not Brian! Yes Brian!* His company was moving him two hours away; not far, but too far to commute. He was to begin work at his new location in six weeks and he and his family were to move within three months.

Monday morning I got up and wandered to the basement. I fell to my knees and began to sob from my gut. It was like the cornerstone had just been pulled from everything I had invested in for the past six years. It was about more than a building or a career. It was about a ministry friendship.

Year seven was bittersweet. It was sweet because of all the new people that filed into the new building for worship services. Each month we broke all previous Sunday morning attendance records. Many of the new people were like the hungry young Christians who came when we first started the church. Normally I would have thrived on the situation, but the bitter had eroded the sweet.

I missed so many people. I had not only weathered the storms of their development but had come to depend on their skills. Without them we were now at our attendance high and leadership low. There were so many gaps in leadership and open positions, and I was still the only pastor on staff. The workload was great and the emotional load was greater.

There were so many victories to ponder and moments of grace to share. I could have been recharged with drive and purpose as I was seven years earlier, but I had lost something and didn't know what. Figuratively speaking, I was blind and couldn't find my way out of the bitter side of things. Like a blind man I needed someone to lead me out of the darkness, my blindness.

About the time so many were moving out of the area, Tom moved into a neighboring community. Tom was on staff with the Navigators, a parachurch organization well known for its ministries in the military and on college campuses. His new assignment reflected the Navigators' strategic expansion into communities. Tom, a seasoned veteran, had about fifteen years of life and ministry experience on me. As a simple, unpolished farm boy at heart, Tom knew God and understood people. While I was long on explanation, Tom was long on application, and that's what I needed!

Tom would listen to me for hours regardless of the topic. Hesitant to interrupt, he waited until I took a long pause before inserting a few well chosen words that helped order my thoughts. Then he would probe with honest questions, smiling patiently as I searched for a safe answer. Sometimes Tom would burst into laughter. My response varied from agitation to relaxation. By the end of each meeting I was taking myself and my situation less seriously. More than once I heard Tom say, "You lose perspective."

Technically speaking, "Perspective is the art of picturing objects on a flat surface so as to give the appearance of distance or depth."²⁶ Applying this definition to my thinking, I would have to say that I was viewing events as one-dimensional, magnifying all that seemed hopeless while screening out anything representing hope.

Figuratively speaking, perspective is “The effect of the distance of events upon the mind. Perspective makes happenings of last year seem less important.”²⁷ An example of a loss of perspective is recorded by Robert Louis Stevenson, “Sleeping or waking, I beheld the same black perspective of approaching ruin.”²⁸

While I was not in any life-threatening situation, I was definitely losing hope because of my loss of perspective. I could not think big picture.

Unpleasant as it was, I would eventually thank God for sending Tom my way to point out my loss of perspective. I would also discover that I was not alone in my loss.

Throughout history some of God’s most remarkable servants have suffered from a loss of perspective. No one made a more emphatic declaration that Jesus was the Christ than John the Baptist. While others inquired and investigated, John pointed to Jesus:

The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! ³⁰ This is the one I meant when I said, ‘A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’ ³¹ I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel.” ³² Then John gave this testimony: “I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.’ ³⁴ I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God.” ³⁵ The next day John was there again with two of his disciples. ³⁶ When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, “Look, the Lamb of God!” ³⁷ When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus. (John 1:29-37)

Convinced of who Jesus was, John was convincing—so much so that his disciples began to follow Jesus. John knew his own identity as the voice preparing the way for the Christ (John 1:23), and he knew who Jesus was—the Christ. I would have never guessed that John would lose perspective based on his clear pronouncement of Jesus as the Christ.

However, there came a day when even John lost perspective. Blinded by his own circumstances, John lost perspective: “After Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in the towns of Galilee. ² When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples ³ to ask him, ‘Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?’” (Matthew 11:1-3).

John’s question has baffled many Bible students over the centuries. I find his question contradictory to what John had so confidently stated at the baptism of Jesus. I ask myself, *had John forgotten the first day he spotted Jesus in the crowd and those words about Jesus that flowed out of his mouth? What about Jesus’ baptism, the dove descending, and the thunderous words from heaven, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:17)? Was it now all a myth to John?*

Years ago I visited Israel. Numerous attractions stuck in my mind for weeks after returning home. But no location fused itself to my emotions more than a hole in the ground. Hewed straight down into solid stone was a cistern, originally designed to store water. These cisterns not only held water; they held prisoners, as the Prophet Jeremiah experienced: “So they took Jeremiah and put him into the cistern of Malkijah, the king’s son, which was in the courtyard of the guard. They lowered Jeremiah by ropes into the cistern; it had no water in it, only mud, and Jeremiah sank down into the mud” (Jeremiah 38:6).

For centuries these old cisterns served as caverns for detaining prisoners. Too deep for any prisoner to climb out of without help, cisterns hardly required guards.

I stared at the opening from ground level. It was about the size of a manhole cover. I imagined myself looking up through the hole from the bottom of the stone pit and seeing only a circle of light. Our guide described the conditions at the bottom of the hole as damp, dirty, muddy, and sometimes full of water. Peering into the hole I realized there was no way out, not even to *relieve* myself. Prisoners were at the mercy of their captors. If they were to receive any food or fresh water, it would have to be dropped into the hole at the top of the cistern.

Our guide in Israel was a Bible scholar who fit the land and Scripture together like a giant jigsaw puzzle. As we stood over the open hole of the cistern, he indicated that John the Baptist had likely spent time in a prison like this. I cringed at the thought. *Could I question John the Baptist for losing perspective in such a hole as this? No wonder John lost perspective and needed a word of assurance from Jesus:*

Jesus replied, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: ⁵ The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. ⁶ Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me.” ⁷As John’s disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: “What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind? ⁸ If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings’ palaces. ⁹ Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰ This is the one about whom it is written: “I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.’ ¹¹ I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone

greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”

(Matthew 11:4-11)

Jesus does not scorch John’s ears with a scalding rebuke for his lack of faith. Instead, he speaks what must have been music to the prisoner’s ears. Jesus knew that John had lost perspective while in a hole in the ground. So Jesus renewed John’s perspective.

Years later I attended a Promise Keepers rally at the Washington Mall. Joining a million men in song, sermon, and prayer was unforgettable. But what I remember best was a question whispered in my heart: *Are you willing to be lowered in a hole for me?* Sitting on the ground I pondered the question for most of the afternoon. The question did not leave me until I was willing to be lowered into a dark pit where it would be so easy to lose perspective.

John the Baptist’s ancient predecessor also lost perspective. It was said of John that he would, “Go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah” (Luke 1:17). No one performed more magnificent miracles by the power of God than Elijah. Yet he would suffer as well from a loss of perspective on at least one occasion.

First Kings eighteen and nineteen provide a startling portrayal of lost perspective. Chapter eighteen contrasts the pitiful inability of idols to do anything for those who worship them, compared to the prevailing power of God demonstrated through the courageous Prophet Elijah. After a climactic victory over the prophets of Baal, chapter nineteen depicts him running for his life.

SYMPTOMS OF LOST PERSPECTIVE

Symptoms sabotage our best attempts to conceal our weaknesses. Hide, cover, suppress as we may, symptoms surface like frost on a fall pumpkin. As annoying and embarrassing as an *idiot light* on a dashboard of a car, symptoms force the issue. Symptoms indicate that something needs correction or adjustment.

Elijah would be remembered as the elite among prophets. His name is repeated twenty-nine times in the New Testament. Only Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration . The very mention of Elijah was equated with the miraculous power of God Almighty. However, not even Elijah could escape the symptoms of lost perspective. In First Kings nineteen Elijah displays *the fear of man* as a symptom of lost perspective.

FEAR OF MAN

Now Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. ² So Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah to say, “May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of them.” ³ Elijah was afraid and ran for his life.

(I Kings 19:1-3)

He who was once so fearless now fearfully runs for his life. Elijah had met King Ahab face-to-face and called him a troublemaker a few hours before this episode with Jezebel. Standing courageously before a mob of angry idolaters and four hundred cultic prophets, he boldly condemned their actions as Baal worshipers: “Elijah went before the people and said, ‘How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.’ But the people said nothing”

(I Kings 18:21).

Elijah ran from the threat of one woman. True, she was not just any woman. She was Jezebel, queen of Israel, and arguably the most wicked woman to walk this earth. To this day her name is synonymous with the character of a wicked witch. The contrast in Elijah's demeanor is shocking. One day he rules in victory, the next he runs in defeat. His symptoms cause the faithful to shudder and ask, "*If Elijah the prophet can falter like this, what about the rest of us?*" His symptoms are real. Obviously he has lost something between chapters. His previous perspective is now out of focus.

DESPONDENCY

Fear is followed by a more dreadful symptom—despondency. Despite numerous miracles and victories, Elijah lost all hope of good overcoming evil. Prophet of prophets, miracle worker of miracle workers was Elijah; yet he was without hope that his renowned ministry had a chance against the evil of his day. At least, that's what he thought! Void of any request for help, the premier prophet of all time feels like a total failure. "While he himself went a day's journey into the desert. He came to a broom tree, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. 'I have had enough, LORD,' he said. 'Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors'" (I Kings 19:4).

Elijah's response reminds me that even the best of God's servants falter when losing perspective. It doesn't matter what God has accomplished through you or me previously, when we lose perspective it is over until perspective is regained.

MARTYR SYNDROME

Elijah's obsession with his own death may qualify as a martyr syndrome. He may have been using martyrdom to validate his sacrifice as heroic in order to take some of the sting out of defeat. Twice Elijah answers the Lord with the same statement: "I have been very zealous for the LORD God

Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too” (verses 10, 14).

In his frame of mind there was only one thing left for Elijah to do—die. I do not question Elijah’s sold-out readiness to become a martyr for the work of God. What baffles me is his desire to become a martyr, as if his death were a last ditch effort to salvage something out of defeat.

Oswald Chambers wisely warned: “Always guard against self-chosen service for God; self-sacrifice may be a disease. If God has made your cup sweet, drink it with grace; if He has made it bitter, drink it in communion with Him. If the providential order of God for you is a hard time or difficulty, go through with it, but never choose the scene of your martyrdom.”²⁹

Choosing the scene of his martyrdom is what I feel Elijah was doing. A martyr syndrome has at least a tinge of self-focus mingled with the cause. In his own eyes Elijah has done all he can do in his lifetime for the Lord’s cause, and now he is about to die as the last faithful prophet. Given his perspective, dying is the only thing left for him to do. All of his faithful attempts to turn the tide have failed. With Jezebel’s wrath in hot pursuit he is sure to die alone. That’s what you think, Elijah!

In contrast martyrdom was the furthest thing from God’s plan for Elijah. God saw to it that Elijah did not die. God transposed Elijah directly into his presence, a rare privilege enjoyed only by Enoch (Genesis 5:24). The degree to which Elijah’s perspective was twisted is unveiled in I Kings 2:11, “As they were walking along and talking together, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind.”

FROM SYMPTOMS TO CAUSES

Loss of perspective may be caused by physical needs and limitations. James points out that Elijah, who had prayed many miracles into reality, “was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years” (James 5:17).

Elijah’s God-given ability to perform miracles did not exempt him from requiring sleep: “Then he lay down under the tree and fell asleep” (verse 6). Likewise he experienced hunger: “All at once an angel touched him and said, ‘Get up and eat.’”⁶ He looked around, and there by his head was a cake of bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again” (II Kings 19:5, 6). The fact that Elijah’s lack of rest, food, and water are mentioned in the narrative, leads me to believe that his physical condition played a role in his loss of perspective.

Physical conditions clearly impact psychological responses. Wartime interrogation of prisoners is often enhanced by denying them food, water, and sleep. Prisoners may eventually give in to the requests of their captors, having lost perspective as to what is more important—physical needs or top security information.

Every once in a while I meet people who insist on finding a spiritual answer for a physical problem. They apply more spiritual discipline when they need to go to the doctor and have a physical. Not all depression is spiritual or psychological. For some it is a matter of thyroid or chemical imbalance. I have inserted this paragraph as a suggestion to those who have not lost perspective; so much as they have lost physical wellbeing.

The text, however, unveils a greater cause for the disintegration of perspective. There has been a shift in focus between First Kings eighteen and First Kings nineteen. In chapter eighteen the subject is more often the

Lord, and Elijah is the subject through which God performs miraculous deeds.

At the time of sacrifice , the prophet Elijah stepped forward and prayed: “O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command.”

(I Kings 18:36)

Elijah said, “As the LORD Almighty lives, whom I serve, I will surely present myself to Ahab today.”

(I Kings 18:15)

In chapter nineteen, Elijah speaks primarily of himself, and the Lord is the object. God has all but dropped off his radar scanner. “I have had enough, LORD,” he said. “Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors” (verse 4b). Verse ten states: “I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.”

Perspective definitely shrinks when we become the subjects of our conversations and the solutions to our problems. We may step into the arena of high demand with high hopes as long as our physical, mental, and emotional resource gauges are on full. But once they are depleted, we sink like the Titanic at sea.

I find it noteworthy that Elijah sees himself as the last faithful prophet through which God can work in the previous chapter as well. “Then Elijah said to them, ‘I am the only one of the LORD’s prophets left, but Baal has four hundred and fifty prophets’” (I Kings 18:22).

Elijah's perspective was somewhat skewed even during his courageous showdown with the prophets of Baal. Misinformed as he was, Elijah still performed miraculous deeds in the face of great opposition. Yes, it is possible to do great works for God with a distorted view of ourselves. But distortion is sure to catch up with us, as it did with Elijah.

FROM CAUSES TO CURES

I am so thankful that in his wisdom God included First Kings nineteen in the Bible. Without it I would think that Elijah was superhuman and unlike the rest of us. I would dismiss him as either a freak or an angel. I might even go so far as to call him the fourth member of the Trinity. Elijah might do without this chapter, but I can't! It identifies his propensity to lose perspective as well as identifies the path to recovering a true perspective.

Sandwiched in-between repeated claims by Elijah that he alone remains faithful is a short narrative which reveals a key to restoring perspective:

The LORD said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. ¹² After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. ¹³ When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. Then a voice said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

(I Kings 19:11-13)

A WORD FROM GOD

A Word that Comforts

Compared to the fierce conflict of chapter eighteen, chapter nineteen unfolds quietly. Instead of tense dialogue, solitude permeates the scene. Elijah flees to a place of solitude in the wilderness. He falls asleep by himself. None other than the voice of God arouses him. His conversation is with God and God alone. Intimacy with God dominates the text. John Eldredge describes well the value of solitude: “To recover his heart’s desire a man needs to get away from the noise and distraction of his daily life with his own soul. He needs to head into the wilderness, to silence and solitude. Alone with himself he allows whatever is there to come to the surface.”³⁰

The narrative redirects our attention from the sensational to the serene. Like Elijah we anticipate God will show up in the spectacular: wind, earthquake, and fire. Each time we are informed that the Lord was not in any of these attention grabbers: “But the LORD was not in the wind.” “But the LORD was not in the earthquake.” “But the LORD was not in the fire.”

Instead, Elijah is directed to a quiet, personal setting to receive the word he needs. Elijah does not need more fanfare, conflict, or strife. He needs solitude and quiet assurance that God was there, is there, and will be there for him whatever happens and wherever he goes. He needs a gentle whisper from God, “And after the fire came a gentle whisper...What are you doing here, Elijah?” (I Kings 19:11-13). It is in solitude that God’s voice is heard, a whisper within. The comfort is not so much in what God says but in the fact that God has spoken. The silence has been broken by the voice of God. Therein lies the comfort, even if his voice asks a question for which we have no good answer.

A Word that Sends

The next verses describe Elijah’s completion of his journey. He was not to stew in self-pity any longer, for God had a clear plan for continuing what he

had begun through Elijah. Elijah had to accept that it was no longer about him. It was time to pass the mantle on to others who will continue what he has been doing.

There comes a day for each of us when the question shifts from, *what is God going to do through me to what is God going to do through the next generation?* Restoring perspective is contingent on our willingness to accept that others will play a major role in the next chapter of God's kingdom plan. Elijah's next move was to anoint others to continue what God had begun through him—the most significant being the young Prophet Elisha:

The LORD said to him, “Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram. ¹⁶ Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet. ¹⁷ Jehu will put to death any who escape the sword of Hazael, and Elisha will put to death any who escape the sword of Jehu.
(I Kings 19:15-17)

A Word that Corrects

Any view that distorts reality must be corrected in order for God's perspective to be restored. Elijah had believed that he was the last faithful follower of the Lord. While he had witnessed repeated apostasy on the part of the people he loved, Elijah was not alone. God corrected him, informing him there were as many as seven thousand in Israel who had not given in to Baal worship: “Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him” (verses 15-18).

Like Elijah we need a word from God which comforts, sends, and corrects. These ingredients are essential to the restoration of a true perspective.

Chapter nineteen is about restoring perspective in a restful setting. There are times when a dramatic encounter with God grabs our attention, like Moses experienced with the burning bush (Exodus 3) or Saul's blinding-light encounter with Christ (Acts 9). However, when it comes to restoring perspective, rest works best! As I once told a dear pastor who was hooked on his own adrenaline, "You can't change the oil while the engine is running." He was the engine that needed to be shut down for repairs and maintenance.

It has taken me a long time to resist the urge to speed up in order to catch up with God. I have always had a tendency to press more into a day than twenty-four hours would hold. I have run from one activity to the next, multi-tasking all the way. While I am tempted to speed up in an attempt to catch up with God, it is more often slowing down, shutting down, and shutting off that is necessary; even though it feels so wrong.

PERSPECTIVE EASILY LOST

Even as I write this chapter, I find it easy to lose perspective. Seldom is it one event that distorts perspective. An accumulation of events has been eroding an accurate perspective for months.

In August my mother had emergency surgery at age eighty-five . She was given a twenty-five percent chance of survival. Three days later Mom's vitals were dropping, and I began to think about writing her obituary. On the fourth day after surgery Mom amazed all of us, including doctors and nurses, as she showed strong signs of recovery. We didn't think she would make it through August, but she did. September brought new complications causing us to doubt she would make it through the month, but she did. After

two months of being in the hospital and nursing home, Mom finally came home. It is now Christmas and Mom is still living at home with assistance. I am relieved along with my siblings. However, all three of us admit that numerous hospital and home visits, discussions, and decisions with medical teams have taken their toll on us.

During this same period of time, I encountered a number of deaths at my part-time job as a trucking company chaplain. Two weeks before Christmas I attended a funeral of a truck driver who died of cancer. The week before Christmas I talked at length with three widows of drivers whose husbands had died suddenly during the fall months. One of the accidents happened just three days before Christmas. Being the bearer of bad news several times did not seem to bother me until the day after Christmas, Sunday.

Just before church I went downstairs to let our two dogs out. When I opened the door I was stunned by a very unpleasant odor. Cricket, our fifteen-year old English Springer Spaniel, had lost control of her bowels. In the midst of cleaning up the mess, I began to have thoughts about putting her down. *She is blind, but sees better than she hears. She has a heart murmur and is very arthritic. What's next?* We had talked about putting her down more than once but always delayed it since she was such a fighter and still had spring in her desire if not in her legs. The thought of taking her out of her discomfort suddenly gave me discomfort. Today I cringed as I thought; *this is going to be more difficult than I thought.*

Cricket had been a stabilizing factor for our boys during a move across three states, fifteen years earlier. As our boys grew up, they would snuggle up to her and allow her to comfort them whenever they had bad days. She had been a great family pet for so many years; it was hard to imagine our home without Cricket. Besides, she was a hunting buddy to me and our boys. She had flushed and fetched so many birds with such enthusiasm. She never quit on us. Then there were the puppies. Cricket had given us a litter

of five and hovered over her daughter while she gave birth to a litter of eight. With her puppy and hunting days behind her, she still yearned for affection. *This isn't going to be easy*, I thought to myself. I felt ill as *putting her down* crossed my mind.

Once the mess was cleaned up, I got ready for church where I would take another blow. When I arrived a dear friend, who had agreed to do a very specific favor, told me that he would not be available to help out. It was a very legitimate excuse; I just wasn't in the mood for excuses that morning. I was experiencing self-pity, the most sincere kind. *I've given so much to so many people the last few months. Why can't someone come through for me when I need them? I don't want to see or talk to anyone this morning. I can't wait to get out of here and go home.* My perspective was losing altitude faster than a B-52 full of bombs and out of fuel.

As with Elijah, Jeremiah, and John the Baptist, the loss of perspective may appear to be sudden and drastic. However, the build up to the loss may be weeks or months in process. Loss of perspective may follow victories over immense opposition which leaves a person physically, emotionally, or spiritually depleted.

PERSPECTIVE, A GOD'S EYE VIEW

God never needs to consult a committee for a new or renewed perspective. He is the committee on true perspective—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God never needs to gather more information. He is omniscient, knowing all things. God never needs to step back to get a different view. He sees all things from all angles at once for he is omnipresent. God doesn't need time to think about what he will do or how he will respond. He is eternal and knows how all events turn out—past, present, and future. God doesn't lose perspective because of fatigue. He doesn't get tired. God is true perspective!

We are none of the above, yet God desires that we view heaven and earth as he views them. That's a unique privilege and if it requires settling down into a restful state of solitude, it is worth it and God is worthy of it.

I still lose perspective even after citing all these examples and having my perspective restored many times. The difference is that I recognize it more readily for what it is and back off from activity by inserting rest into my life. I have learned to say, *It's OK to rest for a few hours or a day until I can think clearly again.*

I am not necessarily talking about sleep. As the undisciplined college student said to himself the night before finals, *When in doubt, sack out!* Sleep has its restoration power when it comes to tired bodies and sleepy minds. However, as I emphasized in chapter one, rest divine is something more than sleep. More will be said on the nature of rest in future chapters.

What must be emphasized is this: the cost of going forward is too great when you don't know where you are. All too often busy people continue to do what they have done in the past, year after year without a clear perspective. They resemble a boxer who is out on his feet; he has been hit solidly in the head and has a concussion. He remains on his feet, only partially aware of what is going on. He continues to flail away at his opponent, ridiculously ineffective, until the referee stops the fight or his opponent floors him. Many people who were once effective workers have marginalized themselves by just working harder and longer after losing perspective. Others may slip into a mental funk so deep they minimize whatever abilities they once applied to their work and lose all enthusiasm for life itself.

WISDOM LITERATURE

A true perspective pleases God. I say this because so much of Scripture is given that God's people might gain and regain a true perspective. There is a section of the Old Testament known as Wisdom Literature: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon. These books and passages of Scripture claim they are able to make the reader wise as in the case of Psalm 19:7-14:

The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple. ⁸ The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes. ⁹ The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever. The ordinances of the LORD are sure and altogether righteous. ¹⁰ They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb. ¹¹ By them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward. ¹² Who can discern his errors? Forgive my hidden faults. ¹³ Keep your servant also from willful sins; may they not rule over me. Then will I be blameless, innocent of great transgression. ¹⁴ May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer.

I find it interesting that the Psalmist's purpose in internalizing the wisdom of the Scriptures is to please the Lord: "May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer" (verse 14).

I find it even more interesting to observe that so much of the wisdom literature is written not by writers who have God's perspective chapter after chapter but writers who are *searching for* his perspective. They are people whose whole lives were pilgrimages in search of God's perspective. Through a painful process of elimination these sojourners found it by resting on simple truths that were readily available to them throughout life.

Such was Solomon's recommendation to centuries of readers at the end of Ecclesiastes: "Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, 'I find no pleasure in them'" (Ecclesiastes 12:1).

Psalm seventy-three is one of my favorite psalms. It was written by Asaph, who headed the service of music during the reigns of David and Solomon. I love the way he admits his struggle with envy and unveils the process of restoration from a faulty, envious perspective to a true, godly perspective.

Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. ² But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold. ³ For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. ⁴ They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong. ⁵ They are free from the burdens common to man; they are not plagued by human ills. ⁶ Therefore pride is their necklace; they clothe themselves with violence. ⁷ From their callous hearts comes iniquity; the evil conceits of their minds know no limits. ⁸ They scoff, and speak with malice; in their arrogance they threaten oppression. ⁹ Their mouths lay claim to heaven, and their tongues take possession of the earth. ¹⁰ Therefore their people turn to them and drink up waters in abundance. ¹¹ They say, "How can God know? Does the Most High have knowledge?" ¹² This is what the wicked are like—always carefree, they increase in wealth. ¹³ Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence. ¹⁴ All day long I have been plagued; I have been punished every morning. ¹⁵ If I had said, "I will speak thus," I would have betrayed your children. ¹⁶ When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me ¹⁷ till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny. ¹⁸ Surely you place them on slippery ground; you cast them down to ruin. ¹⁹ How suddenly are they destroyed, completely swept away by terrors! ²⁰ As a dream when one awakes, so when you arise, O Lord, you will despise them as fantasies.

(Psalm 73:1-20).

Asaph admits his former envy as well as his need for a change in perspective. Verses twenty-one and twenty-two represent a huge breakthrough in the Psalmist's attitude. Asaph looks back and sees how blinded he was by his loss of perspective: "When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, ²² I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you."

I cannot count the number of times I have looked back with embarrassment at my short-sighted, despondent attitude and murmured, *How could I have been so blind, so faithless, so foolish, after all the ways God has shown his love to me?*

Asaph now sees clearly and experiences genuine prosperity as he reviews the immeasurable privilege of knowing God. In contrast, the present pleasure of the ungodly is short-lived as their fate is destruction.

Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. ²⁴ You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory. ²⁵ Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. ²⁶ My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. ²⁷ Those who are far from you will perish; you destroy all who are unfaithful to you. ²⁸ But as for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the Sovereign LORD my refuge; I will tell of all your deeds.

(Psalm 73:23-28)

When it comes to regaining perspective, there is nothing new under the sun. Some who have gone before us figured it out long ago. As D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones said of Augustine, "The great St. Augustine knew it; for quite a period he had this restlessness of soul and at last he cried out, 'Thou hast

made us for Thyself, and our souls are restless until they find their rest in Thee.’”³¹

All of Scripture is God breathed (II Timothy 3:16-17) and therefore readily available to give us a perspective adjustment as we prayerfully desire God’s view of things. A *bird’s eye view* is an old cliché used to describe the advantage a bird has as it hovers overhead and sees what is not visible from the ground. The bird sees the big picture while ground creatures, including man, see only parcels of ground and objects that block distant landscapes. Better than a bird’s eye view is a God’s eye view. God sees all—past, present, and future—all the time. The Scriptures are written from a God’s eye view to help us gain his perspective.

Several years ago I was teaching through the Book of Ephesians when a parishioner challenged the point I was making about our privileged position in Christ. The text in discussion was Ephesians 2:4-7:

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵ made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. ⁶ And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, ⁷ in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

(Ephesians 2:4-7)

After I read aloud verses four through seven, he blurted out, “But that’s God’s perspective!”

“You are absolutely right,” I responded, “and that’s the perspective God wants us to have as we live our lives on earth.”

As I seek to please God during my few and fragile days on earth, I now realize that maintaining God's perspective in a short-sighted world has no substitute. I can serve God in many ways, but God is pleased when I diligently devote myself to maintaining his perspective. Like it or not, I must admit that rest is always a part of the maintenance agenda. So I pray with the Psalmist: "May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer" (Psalm 19:14).

Prayer

Lord God, blessed be your name now and forever, for your perspective has always been clear and true. Neither sin nor sorrow has ever clouded your view or understanding. You alone see and know all things with precise clarity. You alone are true and the measure of truth throughout all eternity.

Forgive me for the many times I have entertained sinful and self-centered thoughts that have clouded my perspective and sent me into a mental funk. Thank you for providing a true and renewed perspective that pleases you. In Jesus' name and for his sake I pray, Amen.

Questions to Ponder

1. Can I recall a time when I lost perspective? If so, describe it.
2. Assuming I have lost perspective at some time, how did I regain a true perspective?
3. If I were in a condition of lost perspective today, what would I do to get out of it?
4. What practice(s) would help me maintain a proper and true perspective?

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