

THIRTY REASONS TO NEVER GIVE UP

***SHORT STORIES FOR WHEN LIFE LOOKS
NOTHING LIKE YOU THOUGHT IT WAS
GOING TO LOOK***



SHIAN KLASSEN

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like you thought it was going to look**

**by
Shian Klassen**



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PREFACE

Giving up.

It's a tough and lonely place especially when it appears to be our only resolve. I get it, having been there more times than I care to admit. I've heard people say that there's no difference between giving up and quitting, but I disagree. In my mind, giving up is far worse than quitting.

I believe quitting to be a healthy part of life when done right. It's something that we all must do when God reveals His plan and opens the door to a new season. It's a grab and go process. We grab hold of what is ahead while letting go, or quitting, what was behind.

Giving up is different. Giving up isn't as much an action as it is a heart decision. More specifically, giving up is like heart failure. It's when the heart fails to fight and refuses to go forward. Giving up often begins with an overwhelming feeling of fear and isolation, convincing you that all hope is lost and that nobody really cares. It's in these dark moments I want to share a truth I've learned. It's time to tell your heart, "It's not over yet."

This book contains thirty stories of my life along with thirty scriptures, in hopes of giving you thirty reasons to never give up. It's an easy read with chapter after chapter, verse after verse, reminding you of just one thing. You cannot afford to give up.

Never, give up.

Pastor Shian

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*Dedicated to my loving wife Andria, my kids and
all those who believed in me. Thank you*

MY BIG BROTHER

This was it. My life was over. There was no one around to help and nobody to cry to. I was panic-stricken and breathless.

Everyone needs someone to stand up for them when they aren't able. For me that was my big brother. I was in grade two, living near Niagara Falls in Ontario, Canada, and it seemed as though life couldn't be better. Those were the days when school seemed so much fun. My homeroom teacher Mrs. Friesen was patient with me and taught me so many new things about spelling and mathematics. I loved going for recess and hanging out with all my friends, but my all-around favorite time of day came with the ring of the lunch bell. My older brother and I would walk home together, and without fail as we walked in the door Mom would always have prepared for us something tasty and fun to eat. My mom was already the best cook in the world, but if I was lucky my mom would serve what I deemed as the greatest lunch children had ever known: one can of fresh Alpha Getti poured over two slices of cold bologna. It was like eating something from Heaven, a winning combination of flavor and fun. I remember savoring every moment of that meal and, of course, the chance to be at home again with my mom. Then like clockwork my brother would interrupt my moment of culinary bliss, eager to get back to school. As the routine went he would get mad and threaten to leave me to walk alone. But my mom was always there to intervene and make him wait. When he finally got his way I would hug and kiss my mom good-bye and head back to school. Thankfully the afternoons went by quickly, and before I knew it the final bell would ring and we would be out of school and headed for home. Unfortunately that final bell also meant it was time to watch my back.

I feared the bullies. They were always mean and said curse words foreign to my ears. It was the eighth-grader boys, and they

loved to tease, taunt, and threaten us little kids every day and every chance they got. Once school dismissed they would gather around the block and far-enough away from teachers or parents possibly seeing them. Once they were far-enough away they would go to work on us little kids. If we resisted or talked back to them it meant a punch, a kick, or a slap across the face. All too often my friends would fall prey to their dreaded schemes and I would do my best to walk as quickly as I could, pretending as though I couldn't hear anything. That is, until one fateful afternoon when I became their target.

For some reason I had fallen behind my pack of friends and was walking alone. As per usual I was in my own world, imagining something like all little children do. As I looked up I could see ahead of me, the dreaded pack of fearful bullies. Panicking, I quickly looked down to the sidewalk, as to mind my own business, but it was too late. Instant horror flooded my soul as I heard them call my name. They knew my name! How did they know my name? My mind was reeling as I looked around for my friends to help me. Then the taunting began. I was all alone and out of earshot of anyone, it seemed. I wanted so badly to run, but before I could even think of an escape they had me surrounded. I was speechless. Quickly one of the bullies pulled me over to the grass and pushed me so hard that I fell backward. I could feel the tears coming down my cheek as their laughter turned to cussing. This was it. My life was over. There was no one around to help and nobody to cry to. I was panic-stricken and breathless. I closed my eyes and cringed as I anticipated the ensuing punches.

To my surprise what happened next was quite unexpected for this little seven-year-old. I had forgotten that somewhere behind me and farther down the sidewalk was my big brother, walking home with his friends. Unbeknownst to me he had kept his eye on me the entire time. From the moment those bullies pushed me to the ground my brother had already leaped into action. He may have been only two years older, but when called for he was the scrappiest of fighters that wouldn't quit until he won. As I laid on the grass I watched in utter

amazement as this beloved brother of mine took on half a dozen boys twice my age, punching and pushing his way through until the very last one left running and crying home. I gave my brother the biggest smile as he reached down to pick me up and put me on his back.

My life was spared. From that day forward I was never again afraid of walking home. From that day forward the bullies were forever only a memory. They never again bothered to gather a block away. They never again bothered to bully me or my friends. It caused me to walk a little taller each day going to and from school, as well as teaching me to walk a little closer to my big brother from there on out.

Proverbs 18:24 (*The Message*): “Friends come and friends go, but a true friend sticks by you like family.”

Bullies come in all shapes and sizes, and with one basic purpose: to intimidate. I’ve spent many years of my life trying to figure them out, as to why they say and do what they do, but to no avail. I’ve simply concluded that there’s no rhyme or reason to their ways, nor to their need for control. They are who they are. But that’s where a true friend comes in. There’s something special about the bond of true friendship. For one, it’s like family. A true friend is the kind of “family” who sticks by you, believes the best in you, and is there to help you get back up on your feet when you can’t. Who is that true friend in your life today? Not only is it important to have one. It’s important to be one. True friends are there to remind each other of one thing; you cannot afford to give up.

Never give up.

THE FIRST SCHOOL PRESIDENT

Not only was the principal cheering for me, my dad was about to write for me the greatest speech known to mankind. I was really going to win.

As a kid I was often mistaken for being shy. Shy Shi is what people called me. It wasn't because I was afraid to talk, nor was it because I was afraid of people. No, I was the kind of kid who was comfortable in his own skin. But unlike most of the popular kids, I had chosen not to throw my weight around. I also couldn't care less as to whether I was popular or not. Call me odd, but I preferred not to have friends around me 24/7. I've always had friends, but I learned early on in life how to enjoy my own company. I was the kind of child with an overabundant imagination and enjoyed being in my own world. But when it came to finding friends, I found it easier to connect with the ones everyone else labeled as odd, overweight, or unpopular. Those were my kind of friends. They were the ones who were real, and I liked being around real people.

It was Canada and the year was 1980. I was excited to have finally reached my eighth grade in junior high for several reasons. First of all, I was less than three years away from getting my driver's license. For as long as I could remember, I loved cars. I loved hot rods and wanted the chance to drag race one day. Then there were the girls. It seemed like when they reached eighth grade, they instantly became prettier. For as far back as kindergarten I can remember having at least one or two of the pretty girls in class as my good friends. Good friends were never considered girlfriends, however. Even as I entered my eighth grade, the thought of dating one of the girls was somewhat horrifying. Lastly, being in grade eight meant most of the school looked up to you, considering you cool and important. As a kid that meant a lot to me.

As the school year was underway, our principal announced to the class the idea of electing an eighth-grade school president. The school was looking for someone to lead with fresh ideas and plans, in hopes of creating a healthy cohesiveness between students and teachers. Looking back, I think it was more about creating some “buy-in” for us students with hopes of reviving our long-lost school spirit. Our spirit was definitely lost. It seemed like most of my classmates cared for nothing other than smoking, the opposite sex, and being absolute idiots in class. But things were about to be different. The more the principal talked, the more interested I had become.

Let’s face it. It was time someone stood up for the students and it was time that the school recognized they needed a true leader. That leader was me. I could see it perfectly. I would have an entourage of two or three friends who were my Secret Service. They would follow me around while I shook hands and answered questions about the school. I visualized leading our school assemblies, giving hope and encouragement for the troubled souls. I would end all bullying and smoking. I would make it mandatory that everyone smile and pray before eating. I could even extend the recess breaks to give everyone more opportunity to play. Yes, this was my opportunity to shine. And then it happened. Like a heavenly confirmation, the principal glanced at me and smiled. The principal smiled at me! Chill bumps exploded across my body. They had already considered me as their president. This was a direct message from the principal and the teachers for me to put my name in the hat. They needed me to lead the school. There was no doubt in my mind. With a reassuring nod, I returned the smile. I was about to become the first school president.

On my walk home, I couldn’t help but think of all the great things I could change as their new president. Kids needed less homework. In the winter we needed access to full hockey equipment for our outdoor rink. We desperately needed to replace some of the current teachers with nicer ones. I pictured the principal giving me some of his office space for my new desk. My dream was to create a bigger

and better school, complete with free chocolate milk and hotdogs. Yes, I could see it all. My presidency meant that we were about to become the best school in all of Canada.

That evening, at family dinner, I informed everyone that I was going to run for president. I expected the routine hassling from my older brother. As for my younger brother, he didn't say much during dinner so long as he liked the food he was eating. My mom however, was elated with the news. She has always been my greatest cheerleader. She told me I would win and could see me as the nation's next prime minister. I liked that. Next came my dad. Did my thoughts of being the new school president pass the "Dad" test? Would he laugh at me and crack jokes like my brother? Instead, he blurted out the greatest words I had ever heard.

"I will write your speech for you!" he said with a grin.

Write my speech? My dad was the finest businessman and salesman I had known. He had sold everything from life insurance to automobiles to real estate and had his picture in the local newspaper for being top salesperson, many times. I couldn't believe my ears. I was so excited I could hardly eat. I think I started talking fifty miles per hour, telling my family all about my terrific school-altering ideas. I was losing my mind in elation. I was really going to win. Not only was the principal cheering, my dad was about to write for me the greatest speech known to mankind. I was about to be the first school president.

The next day at school, all of those interested in running for president were told to stay behind in class when the lunch bell sounded. I was a little surprised to see three of my classmates—Ben, Gary, and Karen—join me. Yet from the look on their faces, I think they were more surprised to see me. All three of them were popular in school, which meant winning the presidency would be a lot tougher than I thought. The teacher explained to us the rules for campaigning and told us that we needed to submit the "platform" on which our campaign was to run upon. Our platform was to be one main topic or item that we wanted to see improved in our school. Once elected, the principal would help us make it become a reality. I

smiled. This was my chance to leave my would-be opponents in the dust.

I don't remember what my fellow classmates chose as their platforms. All I remember was how eager I was to explain mine. As the teacher turned to me, I most proudly and boldly revealed what I thought would be the surefire win.

"I'm going to provide longer recess breaks," I declared.

To my dismay, my running mates chuckled.

"How much longer?" my teacher asked.

Stunned, I stared back at her. I didn't have an answer for that one. She had me stumped. I really didn't want to commit myself to setting a time, but she wanted an answer.

"Uhh, five minutes. I guess."

I didn't like the fact that she put me on the spot. I already had everything worked out in my head, except the specifics. So the next day we all three began our campaign. We each had to come up with a decent number of names of schoolmates who would be willing to vote for us. Mission accomplished. Somewhere between me offering an unlimited supply of free hotdogs and longer breaks, the list of those voting for me was endless; I was gaining school-wide attention and momentum. My opposing candidates spoke of such things as a school newspaper, educational field trips, and improving our playground. To me they sounded like empty promises. We were kids. What kids needed was more food and more fun. It was time for change.

Finally the long-awaited day had come. The gymnasium was filled with all the students ready to vote and excited to elect their first president. I was nervous. My dad came through for me with flying colors and wrote what I believed was the greatest winning speech ever written. Now all I needed was for everyone to remember my campaign promises and the fact that I cared for what really mattered. With the first speech out of the way, I was called upon to deliver my masterpiece. As I stood behind the podium, I glanced up at the auditorium full of students. Upon taking a deep breath, I opened the loose-leaf paper on which my dad wrote, and I began to recite.

“Thank you, fellow classmates, teachers, and principal. My name is Shian Reneigh Klassen. I was born into a very good family...”

This would forever become my infamous opening line, the line I would never forget, from the speech my dad wrote for me that great election day. For it was at this part in my speech that I began losing the entire assembly to uncontrollable laughter. That day I realized that telling the whole school about your family heritage and how much you loved your parents wasn't “cool for school” in eighth grade. It seemed the longer my speech went, the more everyone laughed. It appeared as though my ship to presidency began sinking fast. So much so that I don't remember anything else I said that day. The next several minutes was a blur. I remember the votes being counted and my opponent Ben winning by a long shot.

By the number of jeers and heckling that ensued over the next few weeks, I came to the realization that my dad might not have been the perfect speechwriter for my presidency. However, I didn't really care. I may not have won the presidency, but I did gain some new friends in the midst of it all and even gained some respect with the popular kids.

Mark 11:23–24 (NKJV): “For assuredly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be removed and be cast into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that those things he says will be done, he will have whatever he says.”

More than anything else, I learned two very important life lessons from my parents in my short-lived run for presidency. I was taught that anything was possible, and I was taught that anything was possible if you didn't give up. Every time I read this scripture, I hear Jesus telling His disciples, and us, the same thing. First of all, the very fact you reach a mountain in your journey denotes that you are moving forward. Always be moving forward even if it's in baby steps. Secondly, no matter how big the mountain you encounter, anything is possible. Look at ways up, around or through your mountain. If all

else fails, hold your ground and tell the mountain to move. No matter how big the vision, how big the dream, never let a mountain dictate to you what is impossible. That's why you cannot afford to give up.

Never give up.

DAD, MY ALL-TIME HERO

He barely cracked a smile. He was gasping for air, and for some reason Dad couldn't seem to get up.

If I could pick a hero in my life it would have to be my dad. He is my all-time favorite. He was the kind of dad who every little kid looked up to and wanted to be like. He was good to my brothers and I and loved his wife, my mom. My dad worked hard to make sure we had everything we needed. He and mom always made sure our house was a home, made sure we had clean clothes on our backs and plenty of food in the fridge. For most of my adolescent years I remember Mom staying home, whereby she earned the title of the world's greatest cook, and as for Dad, I figured him to be the greatest businessman known to mankind.

Dad could do anything. In his late teens he was star quarterback for the city league. In his twenties he was a part of the Charles Atlas bodybuilding club. In his thirties he started a Southern gospel quartet as the lead singer and was good enough that the group produced their own album. At some point in the middle of all this he married my mom and the two of them had me, the greatest child who has ever lived (my brothers know it's true).

It was in my adolescent years when I really began to admire him. He seemed to make everything fun. He did his best to be home with us during the weekends, spending time with his boys. Looking back, I have no doubt that he was a workaholic. He did set aside time for church, however. Without fail, he took us to church every Sunday morning. My dad loved God and made sure his family put God first. What also made the weekends great was the fact that Mom allowed us stay up late on Friday and Saturday nights to hear Dad on the radio. At one time he was a deejay for a local FM station, playing gospel music into the wee hours of the morning.

I remember the time Dad tried his hand in selling used cars. It was the best thing for this young car enthusiast, as Dad managed to bring home a different vehicle two to three times a week. He never parked the cars in the garage because the garage was always stocked full of Amway products. Both Dad and Mom were distributors for the multilevel marketing company that had begun gaining traction in Canada. Oh, and then there was the bookstore. Dad leased a building in our busy downtown area, where he and Mom opened themselves a Christian book and record store called Sonshine Special. My brothers and I loved hanging out at the store on the weekends and entertaining new customers. To add to my dad's list, the record store put him in the forefront of being a gospel music promoter, allowing Southern gospel groups the chance to come up to Canada and sing. As a kid I remember feeling like I was the child of the rich and famous. It seemed as though there wasn't much my dad could not do.

By the time I turned eleven, Dad announced we were moving three thousand miles from our home in Southern Ontario back to my birthplace of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. He and Mom were both accepted by the leading real estate company there to sell houses. Soon, we sold our home along with almost everything we owned, packed up a tiny U-Haul trailer, and headed west. In just a matter of months, the local newspaper declared my parents the dynamic sales duo of our city. The two of them could sell homes as fast as they listed them. Unfortunately it meant a lot of late hours for the two of them and a lot of seven-day workweeks for Dad.

One summer, Dad signed up for the men's city baseball league. Apparently Dad could pitch a ball like none other and somehow managed to always bring his team to the top. In some way I wanted to be like my dad. The man could not be stopped, or at least I thought so.

On one late July afternoon following a ball game, Dad stumbled through the door thoroughly exhausted. After barely making it up the few short steps of our split-level home and gasping for air, Dad laid on the floor panting as though he had just run a marathon. I

remember thinking the time was pristine for me to poke fun at him for being lazy, but to my jokes he barely cracked a smile. He kept gasping for air and, for some reason, couldn't seem to get up. Something wasn't right, and we all knew it.

Shortly following that incident, I remember things starting to get weird at the Klassen home. By the start of school, I found Dad sleeping in his recliner when I came home in the afternoon. I would wake him up, but it seemed like all he wanted to do was either sleep or hug me. I couldn't tell if my dad was sick, sad, tired, or lonely. I asked questions, but all he ever said was that he was resting. By the end of the month our parents called my brothers and me into the living room for a family discussion. The good news was that we were moving to a new house. The bad news was the reason why. To our shock, Dad was diagnosed with an enlarged heart with the prognosis that he didn't have long to live. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Though they tried to convince us that this was okay, the shaking sound in my mother's voice convinced me otherwise.

Upon moving into our new home, Mom made a bedroom for my dad in the office on the main floor of our two-story. At the time Mom was juggling between real estate and being a stay-home nurse, as Dad no longer had the energy to work, much less get out of bed. By the time Christmas rolled around, this all-around athletic dad and businessman I had grown to know had shriveled to less than one hundred pounds and had become fully bedridden. The doctors and hospital had all but given up hope for him.

If there was anybody Dad had grown to love in those days as much as his family, it was the network of Christian businessmen that came faithfully to his bedside to pray. They would sit and read scriptures to my dad well into the night and pray fire down, so it seemed. They would tell him stories of how God healed people and would do their best to get my dad to keep his focus on the positive. It was as though the more they came, the better dad would get. Then I watched as miracles began to happen. Dad was growing stronger. I could hear him laughing again. Then one day I watched him as he got up on his own two feet and walked to the bathroom. Color was

returning to both his hands, feet, and face. As I had grown to expect, this battle was no match for my dad.

Then two nights before his fortieth birthday, he quietly told my mom that he wanted to go Home. He told her that he was done fighting and was more interested in Heaven than earth. He begged my mom for her to show him his birthday present, but reluctantly she told him he had to wait until his actual birthday to see it. Sadly only a few hours later, in the dark and cold early morning hours of Valentine's Day, Dad finished his fight and went Home to be with the Lord.

Dad was the only commander of the ship I knew. He was the one who was never supposed to be sick. He was the fighter. That morning, the house quickly filled with a dozen people who had heard the news. I laid in my bed confused and unsure as to what all this meant and what we were to do. I kept replaying the past eight months and couldn't figure out how it had suddenly come to this. Nothing would be the same anymore.

"God, I need your help," I prayed softly. "I need you to be my dad."

Soon there was a knock on my door. I sat up to see my mom and my brothers come in. She shut the door behind her and walked over to my window and gazed outside while sobbing. Doing her best to gain her composure between each tearful outburst, she told us of how our father had gone Home and how she found him that morning.

"It's only us now," she cried. "We're going to stick together as family and we're going to make it."

I got out of my bed and hugged my mom and brothers. I had never seen my mom cry so much as that day. My heart ached to see her in so much pain. What little I knew, I believed Mom when she said that it was going to be okay. We had to learn to stick together, and no matter what came our way we were going to make it.

Acts 27:20 (NKJV): "Now when neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small tempest beat on us, all hope that we would be saved was finally given up."

I can understand the feeling the men must have had on this boat that day. The day Dad died our lives were turned upside down. We weren't prepared to do life without him. All chances of Dad recovering were forever lost. But when Mom gathered us into my bedroom that dark day she set before us something new. It was hope. It was hope that together we were going to make it.

Together we did. As days turned to weeks, and months into years, I look back and see how the hope that Mom set literally pushed us through each and every obstacle that came our way. I gained a newfound respect and appreciation for Mom and gained a much closer relationship with God, the Father to the fatherless.

In life's darkest moments, when it seems as though you've lost everything, there's something that happens inside the heart and soul when we whisper the words, "I'm going to make it." With the release of those words, you create for your heart a newfound expectation. You create the promise of tomorrow. It's called hope. You won't have all the answers and you may not even know if and how you're going to make it. You don't need to know. What your heart and soul need to hear is you saying that you're going to make it. You see, something supernatural always happens when your words and your belief blend as one. That's why you need to hear yourself say it. That's why you cannot afford to give up.

Never give up.

A MILLIONAIRE'S DREAM

In less than twenty minutes I lost my first home, and everything I worked on in. Unbeknownst to me my woes had only just begun.

I was going to be a millionaire by the age of twenty-five. I had no idea how, but I figured that given my positive attitude, strong mental fortitude, and great work ethic, I could do it.

Growing up, I never had a problem with low self-esteem. I attribute a lot of that to my upbringing. Having both a mom and a dad who were always supportive of me and constantly telling me I would grow up to be a success created a strong, can-do attitude in my personal life. So much so that by the time I reached my teenage years I decided what I wanted in life. I wanted to be a millionaire.

By the age of seventeen I acquired my first retail sales job, selling dress clothes for men. After a few months of that my older brother helped get me a job pumping fuel at a full-service gas station. I graduated high school at eighteen, was married by the age of twenty, and less than a year later was promoted to the assistant manager of the gas station. Having been given a raise in pay to \$7 per hour and with only four years left to reach millionaire status, I felt as though nothing in my dream was impossible. The only exception being, I was still a million dollars short.

One year later the big break toward my financial dream had begun to unfold. Over the period of two weeks I was approached by two business people asking me to manage their fuel stations. Even though I wasn't too keen on staying in the fuel business at the time it was the only thing that I was making decent money doing. My first offer was to manage a station in my city that was about to go "belly up" from a lack of business. Saving something from going under sounded very intriguing. The older couple offered me a starting

salary of over \$30,000 per year, which happened to be almost three times what I was currently making. Everything looked good enough to me, but my mother-in-law, at the time, warned me not to do it because of a dream she had the night before. Torn between pursuing my dream and the possibility of God trying to warn me of pending disaster, I rejected the offer. The fuel station closed their doors a couple of months later.

My second offer came from the regional director of the fuel company I was working for. He offered me the management role at the number one fuel station in the country, 350 miles away. To say that I was elated would be an understatement. My starting salary was \$60,000 per year with a \$5,000 signing bonus. I would oversee at least twenty employees and be responsible in helping increase the annual sales volume. Along with that came the phrase everyone loves to hear. He told me I would be the best fit for the job in all Western Canada. All I had left to do was apply for it and the director would make sure I would be the one to get it. It was this wannabe millionaire's dream come true! Just the thought of being in a management role and having the magnitude of financial resources available to me meant I could finally become what I had envisioned. However, it came with just one problem. In fact it was one big problem. Challenging my teenage millionaire dream was a longstanding childhood dream I couldn't shake. As much as I wanted to be a millionaire, I more so wanted the chance to be a pastor in full-time ministry.

For as long as I can remember I have always loved everything about God and being in the ministry. As a kid I would faithfully read my Bible for hours on end, wishing I could be one of the prophets, or one of Jesus' disciples. By the age of fourteen I prayed and asked the Lord if I could hold tent crusades like preachers did in the '50s. I was willing to do whatever was needed to be in full-time ministry, but I also wanted to do whatever I needed to make a million by the age of twenty-five. I just didn't know how to connect the two, so instead I chose the one.

With a deep breath and convinced of my calling, I declined their offer to manage the number one station. Then, a few weeks later and shortly after turning twenty-three, I was offered a full-time job from the Christian school of the church that I was attending. My role was to be a teacher's aide, so I gladly accepted. It was by no means my cup of tea, but it was enough to get my foot in the door and headed in the direction I wanted to pursue. My salary was a whopping \$1,000 per month, but I couldn't have been more excited. The following year my mom pulled some strings for us, which enabled me to purchase our first home. It was a thousand square-foot ranch style house with a backyard big enough for a dog to play in. I got the home for cheap since it was in dire need of elbow grease and interior modifications. Fortunately the government was offering a home-improvement loan for first-time buyers that didn't need to be repaid for several years. It would be enough money for me to do the work I wanted done.

As my twenty-fourth birthday rolled around, finances were getting tight with no relief in sight. I was working extra shifts at the gas station to make up for the lack of income I was making with the school. I began to long for the days of having a landlord, as I was unsure of how to pay for all the expenses involved with being a homeowner. Then the biggest break for us happened. A family member offered to take on the mortgage payments of my home long enough until I could get my footing back. Thankful and elated, it meant being able to redirect the funds toward other bills and getting to buy food for my fridge once again.

Then shortly after the birth of our son, I was startled by a rather loud knock at the front door. As I opened it, I was greeted by a man who asked if my name was Shian. When I confirmed that I was he, he threw a letter at me and ran away to his truck parked on the street. Mystified and unsure of what had just happened, I picked up the letter and opened it. Inside was a subpoena for me to appear in court for the foreclosure of my home.

Stunned and in shock, I picked up the phone to call my family. Unfortunately the family member who had obligated themselves had

suffered their own financial setback and was unable to keep their commitment. Frantic, I called my bank in hopes of reconciling, but it was of no use. They were not interested in making deals as much as they were interested in foreclosing on my home.

When the dreaded court date arrived, I was accompanied by one of the elders of the church I attended. As I walked into the courtroom, I was greeted by all six lawyers my bank had brought to represent them. They had come ready and prepared to fight. The elder who accompanied me explained to the judge my situation, along with a plan to repay the shortfall commencing immediately. Reluctantly the lawyers agreed but with one stipulation: I was to pay their lawyer fees totaling six thousand dollars. The judge deemed that as fair, to which I disagreed. Then to my horror and without any further conversation, the judge declared my home foreclosed, slammed his gavel down, and walked out of the courtroom. All I could do was sit there surprised and shocked. In less than twenty minutes I lost my first home, and everything I worked on. Unbeknownst to me my woes had only just begun.

From the courtroom I drove back to the school with hopes of somehow finishing my workday. No sooner did I walk into work did the secretary summon me for an urgent call. It was my bank. The bank informed me that they were suspending both my credit card and debit cards effective immediately. I hung up the phone in shock. Slowly I made my way back to the classroom, only to find a complete stranger staring into the class. When I asked if I could help him, he told me he was looking for me. He informed me that the bank had repossessed my car and he was in charge of towing it away. As a courtesy he wanted to give me the chance to clean out my belongings before he did. At this point the problems were no longer raining in my life. They were now pouring. I cleaned out my car and in disbelief watched as he towed it away. Not sure of how I was going to make it home, I walked back into the school to receive my final blow of the day.

The phone was again ringing, and it was for me. It was a bounty hunter collecting on the government loan. I had never in my life been

threatened as much as I was that day with enough obscenities to make a sailor blush. His job was to collect everything he could from my house until he deemed the loan plus the interest was paid in full. I was given twenty-four hours in which to either come up with the money or have him take everything and anything out of my house as payment. I slumped hopelessly in my office chair, knowing there was only one thing left to do. Reluctantly I picked up the phone and dialed the one number I never dreamed I would ever dial. That day, at the age of twenty-five, I filed for bankruptcy.

Jeremiah 1:4–5 (*The Message*): “This is what God said: ‘Before I shaped you in the womb, I knew all about you. Before you saw the light of day, I had holy plans for you: A prophet to the nations—that’s what I had in mind for you.’”

I look back on my life today and can see at least ten things I could have, would have, and should have done differently. But isn't that how it usually goes when life doesn't turn out like you planned? The year I dreamed I would be making a million dollars, I was filing chapter 7. How ironic! I was on the opposite end of the financial spectrum, with literally nothing left to my name. For a while I wondered if I had pursued the right dream or not.

That's why in the midst of life, in the midst of all the ups and downs, mistakes, and misfortunes we find ourselves in, we have to repeatedly go back to the original plan. It's the place where we find our identity, our footing and remember who and whose we are. God says He knew us at conception, and at conception, just as with the prophet Jeremiah, He placed inside us a plan and purpose tailored specifically for us. Our job, along with the help of the Holy Spirit, is to discover that plan. We can't stop short of discovering even if it means a lifetime of pursuit. That's why we must never let a problem be bigger than our purpose. Never let a setback determine your destiny. You cannot afford to give up.

Never give up.

THE CANINE THAT OUTSMARTED ME

It was the ongoing battle between man and beast, and I was set on bringing home the trophy.

It was the first Christmas in my new home. Unexpectedly Mom bought my first wife and me a puppy. It was a Samoyed breed, which gave it the look of something more like a white little bear, so we named her Polar. It was such a happy little puppy and forever playful. I admit that I was excited to own my first dog, but in some ways I was really feeling reluctant. At the time we were both working full-time jobs and I had recently returned to my second year of Bible college, which meant that dedicating time to our new puppy would be somewhat limited. Nonetheless we gave Polar as much as we could in and around our schedules.

Over the next six months we would do our best to take her for walks every day. Polar loved to eat everything in sight, and if left alone she would destroy an entire home in mere seconds. Strapped for cash and working full time, we left Polar with food and water in the back bedroom until we got home. That plan worked long enough until summer arrived, which was about the time the dog learned of how much she loved to eat walls.

With Polar nearing full size, it was time to come up with a better plan. We didn't have any friends who could take care of her, nor did any stores sell dog kennels. To compensate, I thought it best that we leave her outside in our large backyard during the day, which would give Polar plenty of space to run and play. Unfortunately my fence was in dire need of repair. If given the chance, Polar was certain to escape and roam the neighborhood, so I purchased twenty-five feet of the thinnest chain link I could find. That next day I left her a big bowl of food and water, chained her to a fence board close to the house, and said my good-byes. Since most every summer day was sunny and given the fact the dog had twenty-five feet of chain to

roam, I really thought it was the perfect plan for the puppy. That is, until we got home. As I went to retrieve Polar from the backyard, I noticed that the fence board was snapped, and the dog was gone.

After an hour of earnest prayer, driving through blocks and blocks of back alleys and side streets, I found Polar running in and out of people's yards, with her chain in tow. It was an answer to prayer! When I hollered out her name, she was as excited to see me as I was relieved to find her.

Realizing that my natural-born sled dog could break fence boards, the next morning before going to work I made sure the chain was fastened securely to a fence post. Unfortunately, to my dismay, when we arrived home from work that day, she was gone. Shocked and perplexed, the fence post was well intact, but this time Polar managed to snap the chain.

Again I combed the neighborhood and again, after an hour or two, I managed to find the poor pup. By this time Polar and I were so excited to see each other it was pathetic. I drove her home, gave her a bath, and then headed to the hardware store to buy a stronger chain.

The next day, in an effort to keep her close to home, I shortened the chain link to fifteen feet and secured her to the steel gas line at the back of the house. This way I knew she wouldn't escape while at the same time it protected her from the elements in case the weather turned bad. I wouldn't call it the most ingenious plan that I've ever had but I figured that by securing Polar to the steel gas line there would be no chance of the dog escaping. When we arrived home from work that day, I found the little pup sleeping in a two-foot hole she had dug next to the house. Victory! Yes, she was covered in dirt, but at least this time there was no need to drive the entire neighborhood in search of her. As I went to disconnect the chain I stared in horror as Polar had managed to completely bend the steel line, restricting any flow of gas to my house. Shrugging, I spent the rest of the evening reshaping the gas line and refilling the hole in my yard.

By this time it was the end of the week and I was out of backyard options. My last and least favorite option was to leave her in the house. Fortunately our house was equipped with a semifinished basement that was big enough for her to play in and empty enough for her not to destroy anything. So when the following Monday rolled around, we headed to work, said good-bye to Polar, and left her downstairs. I figured that with a full basement to run and play in, along with a good supply of food and water, she would be content. However, when we arrived home from work that day, it appeared that Polar spent most of her day on the landing at the top of the stairs. There she managed to eat at least two inches off the bottom of the kitchen door that separated her from the basement. I couldn't believe my eyes. Once again I needed a better plan.

Life was quickly becoming the battle of the wits between Polar and me. So to keep her from running up the stairs, the next morning I laid at the foot of the stairwell a spare door that I had. Giving Polar no possible way of scaling the door and climbing to the top, happily we left for work. Needless to say, upon arriving home I was pleased to see the dog remained on the basement floor. I had finally outsmarted her! I walked down the stairs, lifted the spare door, and greeted her. It was then that I realized what she had done. Polar had somehow managed to find the wall tape on every connecting seam of Gyprock throughout the entire basement. From the bottom of the wall tape she pulled until the tape ripped the seam out of the wall from floor to ceiling. I stood in horror once again at the damage done. This would take me hours of repair.

The next day I kept the plan as it was, with Polar in the basement and the spare door blocking the stairwell. With the damage to my walls already done, I figured there wasn't more she could do. To my surprise, upon arriving home from work, Polar managed to make it to the top of the stairwell and successfully chewed another inch off the bottom of the kitchen door. I stood there in shock. I couldn't fathom how my dog managed to jump the distance of a seven-foot door, but she did. Now this meant war! There was no way I could let her win. So the next day I decided that I would unveil my ultimate plan in

stopping her. I purchased a small tub of Vaseline and coated the entire spare door before laying it down on the stairs. There was no way she could make it up that door without sliding back down from the Vaseline. Believing I had finally won, we left her in the basement and headed off to work.

By this time I was more excited to come home from work than I was going to work. It was the ongoing battle between man and beast, and I was set on bringing home the trophy. When we arrived home from work that day it appeared as though I had finally won. There was no Polar at the top of the stairs. Happily I hurried down the stairs, only to stop short in absolute horror. My once white and fluffy Samoyed looked nothing like herself. What I saw was more of a glimmering, greased-down oversized rat! Apparently she had made so many attempts at climbing the stairs and jumping past the door that almost every ounce of Vaseline I had spread on the door was now on my dog. Then in an effort to get back at me, she found the dirtiest section of the basement and rolled in it. There sat Polar in the middle of the basement floor, wagging her tail. I believe she was smiling at me, too. I may have won with the door, but she truly won the war. By that point all I could do was laugh.

2 Kings 13:18–19 (NCV): “Elisha said, ‘Take the arrows.’ So Jehoash took them. Then Elisha said to him, ‘Strike the ground.’ So Jehoash struck the ground three times and stopped. The man of God was angry with him. ‘You should have struck five or six times!’ Elisha said. ‘Then you would have struck Aram until you had completely destroyed it. But now you will defeat it only three times.’”

In the spirit of victory and defeating their foe, Elisha directed the king to grab some arrows and prophetically use them to strike the ground, in order to declare a total and complete victory over the enemy. But for whatever reason the king gave up after his third strike. Angry over the king’s willingness to give up so easily, Elisha prophesied a temporary win for this king and his battles that were

about to ensue. It goes to show that the kings' enemies weren't planning on giving up any time soon regardless of the losses they faced. Elisha had attempted to teach the king that attitude has everything to do with not giving up. As in the case of my dog, adversity doesn't necessarily go away just because you push back. Adversity is overcome by not giving up and to not give up means maintaining a winning attitude. You cannot afford to give up.

Never give up.

FORGETTING THE BABY GATE

***Sit tight? I felt like my girl was dying while everyone else seemed to think it was routine.
My mind was racing.***

When you're the proud parent of two little kiddos, one of the safest things you can invest in, especially with a two-story house, is the purchase of a baby gate. Now when your little six-month-old loves to play in a walker, then the next safest thing you can do is to remember to close that baby gate, especially when it's the only thing keeping her from falling down the stairs. I aced it on safety step one. Unfortunately I bombed on safety step number two. I forgot to close that gate. Twice in fact.

Almost five weeks before her expected due date Cassie came into the world, ready to conquer all. However, being born a preemie meant a much longer than usual stay in the hospital's incubator unit. Over the next two weeks, every day I would bring her older brother Dillon with me to the hospital to visit his mom and his new sister. I would watch her inside the incubator and see my darling newborn lying there sleeping. She would always twitch her hands or shuffle her feet when she heard my voice. Then like clockwork I would talk to the nurse and ask when they thought she was strong enough to take home. I remember one particular visit whereby the nurse on duty came over and spoke to me as I was watching Cassie.

"She's going to be just fine, Dad. We call her Sassy Cassie because she's a fighter. She'll be out of here in no time," declared the nurse in the most mater-of-fact way. And out of there she was.

No sooner did we bring her home that I realized she loved everything and anything that went fast. She loved it when I drove fast. She loved it when I ran with her and she loved discovering the Jolly Jumper. The Jolly Jumper gave her the ability to swing and

bounce for hours on end until she grew big enough that one day she almost broke the door frame. Needless to say, it was time to introduce her to the baby walker. I'm not sure how long it takes the average child to figure out a walker, but for Cassie it seemed as though it was seconds. From the moment I sat her in it, she figured out how to scoot down the hallway, pick up her feet, and glide her way across the tiled kitchen floor. Each time she crashed into the fridge or dining room furniture she would break out laughing. It became apparent that I needed to invest in a baby gate for our speed-crazed child in an effort to keep her from falling down the stairs.

Now, in my defense, if I can repeat any task over a relatively extended period of time then there's a real chance that I'll begin remembering to do that task on my own. Unfortunately I wasn't used to closing the baby gate each time that I had to get something from the basement. I should have known that Cassie would try to come after me, and try she did. No sooner did my feet touch the floor of the basement did I hear the crashing of her walker coming behind me. The next few moments were surreal.

End over end the walker quickly toppled down the first flight of tiled stairs. I turned and ran up the stairway in hopes of breaking the remainder of her fall, but I was too late. My daughter lay lifeless underneath the walker as the walker was pressed on top of her. I quickly pushed aside the contraption and picked Cassie up, holding her against my chest. She was breathing but her face was bloodied from the stairs. Thankfully she began to cry, but unfortunately her tiny face had quickly swelled. With her nose squished into her face she began having a hard time breathing. My wife and I quickly put on our coats, jumped in our van, and headed to the nearest emergency. All I knew to do was pray and speak out every scripture from the Bible pertaining to healing. We needed a miracle desperately and we needed it fast. I didn't know if there were bones broken. All I knew was that this little girl was bleeding, she could hardly breathe, and her face was not in good shape.

As we raced to the ER, we were quickly admitted to an open room. One of the nurses examined her eyes, ears, and nose and told us to sit tight until the doctor on duty came. Sit tight? I felt like my girl was dying while everyone else seemed to think it was routine. My mind was racing. I was mad at myself for making the mistake of not latching the baby gate. I was mad at the dumb walker for not having a roll cage or something, and I was upset with the hospital for making us wait. The only good thing in all of it was that it gave me more time to pray. Somewhere in between asking God's forgiveness for my stupidity and pleading with Him in prayer, Cassie started to smile. Her little nose was no longer squished and the swelling in her face began going down. As it did, the doctor came in and checked up on her. He smiled at her, felt around her face, and gave her a clean bill of health. Relieved and thankful to God, we brought her home.

For me I felt as though I witnessed a miracle. This little girl really was a fighter, but God had also been watching out for her. I needed God to watch out for her, especially since the week following, I again forgot to close the baby gate. Without fail, Cassie followed behind me, plunging her walker at full speed, spiraling down the stairwell. One can imagine the sick feeling I had as I heard the crashing of the walker behind me again. I turned and ran back toward her, picked her up, and began praying. It was the first time I had ever heard the word "divorce" from my wife's lips. However, this time Cassie didn't have to visit the ER. Somewhere between Cassie's body getting used to trauma and effective fervent prayer at work, the swelling dissipated almost as quickly as it formed. I held her close, apologizing to her and her mother profusely. She was going to be okay. As for me, it was the last time I forgot to close that baby gate.

Hebrews 10:38–39 (NCV): "Those who are right with me will live by faith. But if they turn back with fear, I will not be pleased with them. But we are not those who turn back and are lost. We are people who have faith and are saved."

Have you ever messed up more than once? More than twice? Whatever the reason, there are times in life we end up messing up the same way repeatedly. Some things we learn with no problem, while at other times it takes what seems a lifetime for us to learn the lesson. These are often some of the toughest times to get back up. As this verse of scripture states, we are not of those who turn back and are lost. Meaning, we may get knocked down, but we cannot allow ourselves to get knocked out. We don't give up, let up or shut up regardless of whether it is our second time or seventieth time down. Instead, we look at ourselves and say, "I can do what it takes no matter how long it takes!" That's why you cannot afford to give up.

Never give up.

THE UNEXPECTED ADVENTURE IN THE WILDERNESS

You could have heard a pin drop as we all in utter silence stared at the bear and she at us.

Excited and a bit apprehensive, I boarded the first flight I had ever taken in a classic single-engine Beaver headed to a remote lake in Northern Saskatchewan. This was to be my first fly-in fishing excursion of several. I had joined a handful of other ministers for this trip, some of whom had never had the experience of fishing on a remote lake.

As our plane descended below the cloud line, all we could see below was land spotted by hundreds of semi-frozen lakes. It was June, and the ice was still in the process of melting. As the plane gracefully touched down upon our chosen lake, the pilot maneuvered his aircraft toward the dock, with absolute precision and skill. He then swung open the side door and ordered us out.

Surprisingly the air seemed so much colder this far north than what I had anticipated for June. Luckily most of the ice had already thawed off our lake. I could already see several nooks and points surrounding the lake that made for great “snake” holes or fishing spots when catching northern pike. I quickly picked up my bags and followed the others up the small hill toward our housing. This was going to be fun.

At the top of the hill stood two rather tiny buildings, big enough to house a few bunk beds with a small seating area. I quickly claimed my lower-level bunk and went through my gear to find my long underwear. It was barely forty degrees and my T-shirt and jeans were not enough protection. I suited up and stepped out to scout my surroundings. Just the two buildings, an altar for carving fish, and an outhouse summed up our next five days of living conditions. I had

secretly hoped that this trip was worth the five hundred dollars I had invested. Wasting no time, the announcement was made for us to head out into the boats so that we could catch our dinner. Donning a winter coat, gloves, and a life vest, I grabbed my line and tackle and headed down the hill. This was to be my routine over the next few days.

Fishing life consisted of early morning devotions, eating toasted homemade bread with honey, and fishing all day until 5 p.m. Then it was back to the cabin where one of us was designated “fish cleaner” and the others helped peel potatoes and fix salad. Following dinner, we sat around and talked, played card games, or threw darts. I generally took the time to stand out on the dock and throw a few more casts just to enjoy the peace and quiet and get some alone time for my head. By the time 9 p.m. rolled around, the fresh air had gotten the best of us and we headed to bed.

Our final morning is when things got interesting. I was awakened by the sound of clanking cans outside our room. Groggy and half awake, I sat up and checked my watch. It was 5:00 a.m. I couldn’t figure out who was up so early and why they had to be so noisy. Soon it woke up one of the others.

“Who is that?” I asked. Everyone else in the cabin was still in their beds. It’s possible one of the others from the other cabin was up and getting ready. At that point one of the men quickly jumped out of bed and exclaimed, “That’s a bear!”

We all acted like third-graders running to the window to see a police car. Instead, we, like a bunch of crazies, barreled outside the cabin door to see if it was true. There we stood less than ten feet away from a female black bear cub, busy rummaging through some old cans she found underground. Thankfully she took one look at us and ran for the bushes, leaving behind her newfound treasures. Surprised and relieved the bear was gone, we headed back inside to our warm sleeping bags to try to finish our night’s sleep. Unfortunately less than an hour passed when the clanking sound returned.

“She’s back?” I asked one of the others. Once again we raced outside the cabin to see. Digging deep into the dirt was the hungry intruder. For a moment she kept on digging and paid no attention to us. Then quickly she stopped and looked up at us. You could have heard a pin drop as we all in utter silence stared at the bear and she at us. Then without warning she turned and ran off into the bush. At that point one of the ministers walked over to where the bear had been to figure out what had kept her coming back. Buried underneath an unused firepit was a half-empty charred can of beans. How that bear managed to smell that old can buried underground, I will never know. Like harmony we all began thinking the same thing. If the cub smelled food, where was mama? Suddenly our chubby little visitor wasn’t seemingly as friendly. The question now remained, “If she comes back, what if she brings mom?”

“If she comes back, she’s not going to be afraid of us anymore,” said one of the others.

Now we had a problem. If she returned and wasn’t afraid of us, she would stop at nothing to get our food. Once she had the food, our lives would be next. So in an effort to keep the cub away, we dug deep into the old firepit and cleaned out any remaining cans and unburned garbage. Thankfully one of the men from the other cabin happened to bring a shotgun in case of a situation such as this. He quickly retrieved the gun and loaded it. We stood around for the next fifteen minutes and watched the bushes for movement. Nothing but silence. Thinking we scared her off, we turned to head back to our beds and catch the last possible bit of shut-eye before another long day of fishing.

To our dismay, in less than thirty minutes the hungry cub returned. As we all peered outside the cabin, the bear began frantically digging for her missing can of beans. The sounds she was making let us know she wasn’t happy. Seeing us once again from the corner of her eye caused her to stop and stare. This time she chose not to run. Instead the bear stood up on her two hind legs and let out a roar. She was now in charge and wanted us out of her backyard. The cub stood six feet tall, and with anger in her eyes she

took her first step toward us. No sooner did her giant paws advance did my entire body shudder in reflex to the blast of a 20-gauge shotgun firing a barrage of shells into the heart of this beast. In seconds the 300-pound cub hit the ground, struggling to get away from us. As quickly as it roared she gave up her final breath.

Although we had no option, I felt sorry for the bear. In one way we were both there fishing for a meal. Unfortunately the bear would not have been content with a charred can of beans. It was either her or us. Since we had nowhere to run, it was up to us to end the fight. When that old Beaver plane was airborne the next day, I made sure to scout the area just to make sure there were no more furry visitors. Nothing. It was one unexpected adventure we would talk about for a long time.

Romans 12:2 (*The Message*): “Don’t become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You’ll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.”

Hats off to the bear for having an incredible scent! However, given it had tens of thousands of acres to forage and hunt, she lost her life all because she gave up the forest for a half a can of old beans.

Sometimes in life, like the bear, we work ourselves into a situation whereby we get obsessed with the immediate. As the saying goes, we lose sight of the forest for all the trees. The reason being, the minute we take our eyes off the big picture, by default, we adjust focus towards a useless half-can of old beans. The longer we focus on it, the more it shapes our thinking until it becomes all that we see. In other words, it’s easy to give up our purpose and identity by defaulting to an old way of thinking.

When your mission and focus feel sidetracked, always take a step back to rehearse the big picture. Perspective matters. That's why it's important that we keep our attention fixed on God. That's why you cannot afford to give up.

Never give up.

THE STRIP SEARCH

I looked at him in disbelief. That was the strangest request I had ever heard. I stared at him for the longest time, wondering if this was real.

He shouted at me again.

Reluctantly I got up and did as he demanded.

I love road trips. Give me snacks and '80s music and I'll drive thousands of miles in perfect contentment. In my former Canadian city of almost a quarter million people at the time, there was no way to fly to America without driving three hundred plus miles. It generally meant driving south, crossing the US border, and flying out of Minot, North Dakota. Back in the day I loved that trip. It meant getting the chance to drink a vending machine Coke for only .25¢ and getting to visit a huge department store called Walmart, where I could buy myself T-shirts for five dollars. Yes, two incredible life-changing events unheard of for any Canadian citizen at the time. For this trip I had promised my wife that I would pick her up at the airport and then spend the next day doing some shopping together.

At the time the car of choice was a 1984 Mercury Topaz. Being somewhat a self-proclaimed auto mechanic, I did my best to keep the car in tip-top running condition in hopes that it would last us a lifetime. As my custom was before each road trip I made sure the belts were good and tight, the engine timing was calibrated properly, and that the plugs, filters, and fluids were all up to specification. I gathered my favorite snacks, loaded up my overnight bag, and made sure that the boom box was properly centered in the backseat. I had to have the boom box. The factory cassette player had not worked properly for a while, so if I was going to crank the tunes I had to connect the boom box. It's what you did when you couldn't afford a new car stereo.

I set out on my journey and the first ninety minutes were great. Being in the dead of winter, I was fortunate to have had the snow cleared from the highways, and being a Saturday, traffic was minimal. It was then that I noticed some hesitation as I downshifted into fourth gear, but I figured that with subzero temperatures it wasn't uncommon for the little car to sputter every now and then. As I came upon a small town along the way, I let off the accelerator so that I could reduce speed. Unfortunately when I did the car began to shake and sputter. Without warning the tachometer fell to zero and the engine quit running. Thankfully with the clutch engaged, I had acquired enough highway speed for me to glide the vehicle safely to the side of the road.

I couldn't figure out what was wrong. I tried restarting the car but to no avail. This was quickly becoming the worst possible scenario. I needed to get to Minot to pick my wife up before they closed the airport for the evening. This was also the pre-cell phone era, which meant that I had no way of getting a message to her. There were no auto garages in sight and no mechanics I could call to bail me out. My poor car was broken and all I had left was one last option. I needed my brothers to pick me up and drive me there.

At the time both of my adult brothers still lived at home with my mom and stepdad. Seeing as how they had little to no social life, I figured I could count on them. I managed to find a small store just a few hundred feet down the highway where I could call home. Upon hearing my dilemma, my brothers were ecstatic at the chance to help me get to America. It was their chance to get out of Canada and I was footing the bill as well as a free night's hotel stay. Hesitating and wishing I had another option, I instead thanked them for their willingness, hung up the phone, and waited.

Two more hours had passed before the old green '72 Dodge Polara arrived over the hill. As expected, my brothers were beaming from ear to ear as they came upon my broken-down car. Quickly I transferred my belongings to their car, but to my dismay the trunk was full of old car parts, used tires, and every piece of junk imaginable. I went to put my things in their back seat; however, it too

was full of old tires. I should have known they wouldn't have calculated four people being in the car. Nonetheless thankful for their willingness, I threw my belongings into the back seat and hopped in the front. Equipped with the classic bench seat, my brothers and I packed into the front seat and began our trek south. For the next two hours we laughed and shared childhood stories of road trips our parents took us on. I figured that if the rest of the night could go as planned, I would still be able to make it to the airport within ten minutes of the plane landing. This was all going to turn out okay.

As the sun set over the western horizon, we began approaching signs for the US border. Crossing into America was always intimidating for me, as I heard it was for many Canadians. I knew the border agents had to be on the alert 24/7 for people entering illegally, but for some reason their barrage of questions always put me on the defensive, which never goes well with border agents. No matter how hard I tried to overcome it, it always led to a lengthy interrogation. My new concern was in having my brothers with me. They weren't used to border agents. With the three of us sitting together, I was afraid we gave the appearance like we were a problem waiting to happen.

In an effort to compensate I thought it best to coach my brothers on the "skills" of communicating with border agents. Unfortunately my acquired insights and knowledge didn't mean much to them. As a last-ditch effort, I made them promise me they would let me do all the talking. As we approached the lone building I began breathing deeply. It was showtime. As we inched up under the canopy the border agent stepped outside of the building. Moving hesitantly toward the car, he stopped in his tracks to look at this green monstrosity of metal seeking permission to cross. From the front of the car to the back, he stared for what seemed an eternity. Slowly he then sauntered toward the passenger window. As he did I exhaled. This was it.

"Where're you boys headed?" he asked gruffly.

I leaned toward the passenger window, about to give my response. As quickly as the answer was rolling off my lips, in three-part harmony my brothers both leaned forward alongside me and in

perfect unison we responded with a high-pitched, rather oddly cheerful, “Minot!”

I shook my head in disbelief. What part of me answering the questions did my brothers not understand? They had one job and that was to keep quiet, just this once! I looked at the agent with a half-smile, hoping for mercy.

“Park the car and get out!” he snapped back.

I had heard horror stories of border agents taking apart door moldings, seats, and car interiors in search of drugs and then leaving owners to put their cars back together. I couldn’t afford this. My mind was reeling. I called my brothers idiots for not listening to me as we three hurried out of the car. Two more agents showed up with gloves on ready to rummage. This was not my night.

Once inside, the agents had us sit down in chairs in the open area. Two more agents appeared and led the three of us to separate interrogation rooms. Again, I shook my head in disbelief. For thirty minutes I sat patiently, periodically looking at my watch and wishing I could somehow contact the airport. I worried as to what my brothers might be telling the officers. As far as I knew none of us drank, smoked, or did drugs. It had been a few years since I lived at home with them, so I was hoping they were still living the straight and narrow. However, the thought of that only made me worry. We needed to get on the road soon.

With a double tap on the door the agent came in. He had with him a file folder with a couple of papers in it. Questioning began immediately as he took his seat. He had me explain the origin of my name. Then where I lived and why I was trying to get into the United States. I explained my dilemma. There was no sympathy or understanding. He asked me questions about my brothers and my family. Then like a broken record, he asked me again why I was coming to America. If I had understood interrogation tactics, I would have realized then that he was trying to change up the question in order to trip me up. Unfortunately I thought he was being obstinate, so I returned the favor by acting obstinate toward his repeated questioning. That never, ever goes well.

“Stand up, strip down, and face the wall,” he shouted at me.

I looked at him in disbelief. That was the strangest request I had ever heard. I stared at him for the longest time, wondering if this was real. He shouted at me again. Reluctantly I got up and did as he demanded.

The concrete floor was ice cold on my bare feet. He rummaged through my shirt and pants I had placed on the table. Then came the pat down. I was never so embarrassed in all my life. I could swear I heard the agent laughing at me, but I dared not turn around. Following this he ordered me to get dressed as he left the room. Ten minutes later he came back and told me we were free to go.

The entire investigation lasted just under an hour. I was disgusted. However, my brothers thought it was strangely enjoyable. The car was left in one piece, so we quickly piled back in and headed south to Minot. Indeed I was stressed the rest of the drive. Luckily we made it to the airport just in time before closing. Now came a lot of explaining to my wife. It was the trip I preferred to forget.

1 Corinthians 9:24–25 (GW): “Don’t you realize that everyone who runs in a race runs to win, but only one runner gets the prize? Run like them, so that you can win.”

Sometimes our best-laid plans become nothing more than well-organized disappointments. Disappointment is the frustration and sadness we feel when we are unable to fulfill our hopes, goals, and expectations. Sometimes it’s the result of setting the hope or expectation too high. Other times it’s simply the fact we missed the expected appointment. There’s no way I could foresee my fuel pump failing on my car that day, or the fact I would spend my evening being strip-searched. What should have been an enjoyable personal trip turned into one disappointment after another, costing me more money than I had.

Never giving up means we have to figure out a way to isolate these moments and call them for what they are—missed appointments. Missed appointments don't have to be failures. It doesn't mean God has forgotten you, nor does it have any bearing on your abilities. The key is in never allowing a disappointment define you. It means getting back into the race and running. Run with the attitude of winning. Use life's missed appointments and misfortunes to forge the person of strength God has made you to be. You're a runner and you know how to win, so run like it. That's why you cannot afford to give up.

Never give up.

LET US GO TO THE OTHER SIDE

***In English, it's the early warning sign for a potentially large thunderstorm that's brewing.
I couldn't believe it. I should have known something like this would happen.***

It was time I, as a youth leader, came up with a male-bonding trip for the teenagers in my church. I decided to step out of the usual day trip ideas and rent some canoes and head up north to one of Saskatchewan's most popular provincial parks for a three-day excursion, whereby I could teach these boys the art of "roughing it" and working together. My idea was to bring enough food to have a light breakfast each day, canned Spam for lunch, and then rice for dinner. No, I wasn't trying to starve these boys, but rather rice made for a great dinner when combined with some freshly fried fish. The idea was to travel the perimeter of the lake over the three days and then stop and set up camp at around 4 p.m. each afternoon, giving us enough time to fish and then cook it for dinner. It all made perfect sense. In my head of course.

On day one, we arrived at the lake with our canoes in tow. After successfully unloading, we all hopped in the canoes and I gave what would be my custom over the next few years, some simple canoe lessons. I brought with me a couple of my male staff members and a guy in the church who was the local pharmacist at our drugstore. I was licensed in boat safety, food safety, and CPR; the pharmacist was a self-acclaimed outdoorsman, pill counter, and nutritionist. To this day I'm not exactly sure why I brought him, but I remember having him there seemed to put some of the parents at ease. I spent the previous four weeks learning all I could about canoeing, reading topography maps, camping skills, and even began studying the dynamics of weather. I wanted this trip to be a success and I wanted

to make sure I knew what I was doing. Unbeknownst to the team, this was my first time on a canoe as well.

As the trip began, I had made sure our first day was shorter. I have to say that we looked like professionals out on the water. We canoed up the east side of the lake for almost a mile until we found a decent clearing in the bushes, to where we could set up camp. My pharmacist oversaw the first meal. He made sure he covered the rice in powdered vitamin C to fight off any infections. It tasted gross, but we were all happy to be together and enjoyed the sense of adventure for the next few days. As nightfall came we put out our flame and headed to bed, hoping to get an early start to our next day.

Thanks to the help of our pharmacist, we learned how to properly pack out of our campsite early the next morning. He was somewhat angered at us after finding a fish hook in the bushes and somebody's lone sock. We all got the lecture of destroying Mother Nature and the fines we would be charged for leaving things. I don't think the fishhook was ours. In fact nobody laid claim to the sock, except for one of the teens who apparently only brought one sock for the journey.

Needless to say, as the day wore on, our trip was much like a wilderness adventure in slow motion. We traveled around the beach area from where we originally set sail and from there headed to the west side of the lake, staying within twenty to thirty feet of the shoreline. The sun was shining, and the waters were thankfully calm. It was truly picturesque. As lunchtime rolled around we gathered our canoes together. Cracking open the Spam, peanut butter, jam, and bagels, I introduced the boys to my classic rendition of gorp. Gorp is a mixture of peanuts, almonds, raisins, and M&Ms. It's the greatest energy food known to outdoorsmen, and the best part is that it doesn't melt in the heat. Then to the surprise of the team I reeled in a tiny rope I had dragging behind my canoe. Attached to the rope was a can of classic Coca-Cola. I had read somewhere that you could bring one on a trip and then sell it for five dollars. Unfortunately I had forgotten that these were teenagers who were broke. Instead I

sold the can to one of my leaders. Upon finishing our lunch, I realized we still had far too much journey left to cover with only two days remaining in our trip. I had wanted to canoe the entire perimeter of the lake in the three days but had miscalculated the inexperience of these young canoeists. If we were going to stay on schedule, we needed to cross over the largest part of the lake.

Crossing the largest part was not my best choice. If we stayed on the pace we were on, we would need an additional two more days to cover the entire perimeter. Yet with no winds and a lot of muscle, I figured we could make it to the other side in two hours. With a lot of encouragement, I convinced them to set their sights on 'the other side' as they donned their life vests. All we had to do was paddle. At least that's what I thought.

Things started getting weird when the suns' light began fading, shortly after the first forty-five minutes of paddling. Curious, I looked upwards behind us to see a massive anvil cloud covering up the suns light. The anvil cloud is a classic cumulonimbus cloud that has reached the stratosphere and is being fanned out from stratospheric winds. In English, it's the early warning sign for a potentially large thunderstorm that's brewing. I couldn't believe it. I should have known something like this would happen. We needed to get to the other side and a lot sooner than later. The last thing I needed was to be in the middle of the lake in an electrical storm in a metal canoe. I yelled to the team to pick up the pace. The safety of these young people now became my highest priority.

Within the next fifteen minutes, a long squall line of clouds began forming behind us. I estimated that we had a good hour left before arriving upon land. I also estimated that unless those clouds moved the other direction, we were not going to make it across this water without a storm. I informed the group of the pending storm and had everyone fasten their life vests and tie their gear down to the rails. This last leg was going to take focus, purpose, and a lot of energy for us to stay the course. Signifying the storm was nearing, the frontal winds bore down on us with fury.

The calm waters we had grown used to all day were now anything but. With more than halfway across the lake our waters turned quickly to whitecaps. The training I had given the young people the day before was now being called upon. Instinctively we all wanted to turn our canoes away from the face of the whitecaps, but doing so would have meant capsizing. To see the front of the canoe dip down into a wave while waters splashed up and over into the canoe went against our grain of thinking, but it was the only way to survive and remain afloat. Our struggle only multiplied as the winds grew stronger. Water began splashing along the sides of the canoe and into the boats. With one eye on the pending storm and the other on our progress, I began to shout out commands, demanding focus and momentum. We had no choice but to push through.

The rising waves and rocking of the canoe created panic in one of the teens. Impulsively he pulled his paddle out from the water and laid it across the helm of the canoe in hopes of steadying it from the tossing waves. Unbeknownst to him, there's no such a thing as steadying a canoe in the midst of rocky waters. I had learned it was a recipe for disaster and for certain capsizing. In an effort to get his immediate attention I yelled at him until he got his paddle back in the water and kept rowing. If we were going to make it out of the water without incident, it meant we focused as one and persisted as one. He had to make it across.

The thirty minutes we battled seemed like three hours. As quickly as the winds came, they left, and the waters restored to calmness. The storm had changed its direction much to our chagrin. Thankfully we slowed our pace and soon made it to the shoreline safe, sound, and happy. Looking back, it brought a sense of camaraderie amongst us all. We beat the storm and, in the process, learned some interesting life lessons.

Psalm 23:4 (NKJV): “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; For You *are* with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.”

When canoeing, the paddle is used to push the water behind you, which in turn creates momentum or forward progress. In the midst of a storm, pulling the paddle out of the water leaves the canoe at the mercy of the wind and waves. Taking the paddle and placing across the width of the canoe in an effort to somehow steady the craft causes the canoe to shift horizontally alongside the waves, creating a surefire recipe for capsizing.

When the waters of life get rough, the key is to keep moving forward. Avoiding conflict and trying to control life's problems are equivalent to pulling your paddle out of the water and laying it across the bow. It may make sense instinctively, but in the long run you'll end up capsizing your goals and dreams. The key is to always keep the paddle in the water. As David put it, "Yea though I walk through the valley..." We all experience tough valleys. The key is to keep walking. We are all faced with unexpected storms. The key is to face the waves and push the water behind you. That's why you cannot afford to give up.

Never give up.

THE HUNT FOR GREY OWL

By my guess, it had only been there for minutes. We stood in silence.

Were we the ones being hunted?

Exhausted and hangry, we arrived safely at the other side of the lake. Seeing as how I didn't pack anything substantial in the way of protein, we were left with having to fish for our dinner, which caused no small stir amongst the camp. The pharmacist was adamant about cooking up the rest of the rice as our main entree for the evening but I wasn't buying it. We needed fish and there was no dinner until we caught some. Nobody wanted to head back into the big body of water we had just crossed even though the waves had calmed. So instead, I picked up my topographic map and found a small lake over a mile through the bush. I figured it to be the perfect place for an abundance of fish. So myself, two of my staff, and the other half of the teens found a trail, grabbed our fishing gear with three canoes, and took off on a portaging adventure through the bush in search of dinner.

For the next thirty minutes, using only a compass as our guide, we navigated through the heavy brush and winding trails with canoes overhead. One of the teens gave a shout as we came through a small clearing, as ahead of us lay a small lake spanning roughly two hundred feet. There, on the opposite side of us stood a small, rustic uninhabited cabin. I figured that this must be the lake I had seen on my map. As the sun began to set, we dropped our canoes into the water while threading our lines.

"I think that's Grey Owl's cabin," shouted one of the young men. Grey Owl was believed to be one of the indigenous people in the early 1900s who hunted, trapped, and finally became a famous conservationist in Canada. I remember reading that sometime after his death they discovered he was a British national who faked his

identity in order to flee his wife and child and start life over in Canada. Whether or not we had indeed found his cabin remained unknown. However, if this really was the infamous Grey Owl's cabin, then there was a great chance his lake was full of fish.

Fueled by hunger, we pushed out about one hundred feet from shore and cast our lines. No sooner did the hooks hit the water were there fish jumping everywhere! I had never seen the likes of fish responding like this. As fast as we could we would reel the fish in, drop them in the middle of the canoe, then recast our lines to snag another. My guess was that we pulled in over thirty fish in less than an hour. With the evening sun already set, we headed ashore to try and figure out the best way to return to camp.

Since we were short on containers, our only option was to even out the catch of fish amongst the canoes and to leave them piled high there in the bottom of each craft. Instead of carrying the canoes overhead, we each grabbed a side of the crafts and did our best to maintain balance while going through the brush. Since the fish weighed three to five pounds each, the canoes became unbearably heavy. To make matters worse, the dense brush had now locked in the heat of the day, which made us sweat like pigs, forcing a few of us to take off our shirts. Needless to say we became an instant magnet for mosquitos, black flies and horse flies. With each bite on our bare skin we hollered, having no hands free to knock the pesky insects away. We picked up our pace as fast as we could while laughing at ourselves. We looked as rugged as mountain men and smelled just as bad. Our clothes were blood soaked from the dead fish and our arms cut up from the thorns in the bushes. But we had dinner and that was all that mattered.

"Mr. K!" frantically shouted one of the teens from behind. I stopped our caravan of fish transporters long enough to look back to see what the problem was. Fresh and warm, lying on the side of our path was a rather large pile of dung. It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that the only creature capable of excreting something of that size had to be a very large bear. By my guess, it had only been there for minutes. We stood in silence. Were we the ones being

hunted? With over an estimated one hundred and fifty pounds of fresh fish meat in tow we had only one option: grab the canoes and run like mad!

For that last half mile, we were a mob of bloodied, shirtless crazies running and screaming through the bushes. We were never so happy as to emerge from the forest to see our campsite! With smiles on our faces we cleaned every one of those fish, heated up the oil, and had us a fish fry of champions! Life was good. We outlasted the elements, outsmarted the bear, and filled our bellies full of fresh fish and flavored rice. It was the beginning of an annual canoe trip and a lifetime of memories.

Mark 5:25–29 (*The Message*): “A woman who had suffered a condition of hemorrhaging for twelve years—a long succession of physicians had treated her, and treated her badly, taking all her money and leaving her worse off than before—had heard about Jesus. She slipped in from behind and touched his robe. She was thinking to herself, ‘If I can put a finger on his robe, I can get well.’ The moment she did it, the flow of blood dried up. She could feel the change and knew her plague was over and done with.”

All too often we create unnecessary rules for ourselves and then believe we are obligated to bind ourselves to them, even if it means coming up short in life. If we’re not careful, we find ourselves resorting to manageable routines simply because they are less risky, convenient, and easier to control. But what if our biggest catch or victory is on the other side of our convenience? Change happens when we get sick and tired of being sick and tired.

For the woman in the verse above, her answer meant leaving her place of sickness long enough to grab a hold of what could be her miracle. What if the woman didn’t get her healing? Then nothing would have changed. But the fact is, she did get it. In order to get to the place that you need to be you must leave the place you are most

comfortable at today. That's when the miracles begin. It means setting your sights on a better tomorrow and then not giving up until you get there. You will get there. That's why you cannot afford to give up.

Never give up.

OUR FIRST FATHER-AND-SON TRIP

***We sat in the back of the van, looking at each other.
My poor son was incredibly bored, and his poor dad was
incredibly dumbfounded.***

My son Dillon and I finished loading our camping gear in my new van. It was going to be a weekend of firsts for the two of us. It was the first time I got to take my new Ford Aerostar Eddie Bauer extended edition van out on a trip, and it was the first weekend camping trip my son had ever been on. And to boot, it was our first camping trip together.

Camping. It was something I did little of but really enjoyed doing. It was also something that I never remembered my dad doing with me, which made me even more eager to try it with my son. Besides, if there were two things that I enjoyed doing it was going on an adventure and making memories. It was also the chance for Dillon and me to be together and do the “man” thing. However, I think I was more excited about this trip than he was. Dillon was always the most tender-hearted, responsible, calculated and orderly son a parent could hope for. He loved being organized and making sure everything was in its place on a 24/7 basis. Unfortunately having me as his dad meant messing up that perfect world every chance I got. Most of the time my efforts were futile, but this particular weekend was going to be different. Firstly, Dillon gets to hang out with his dad. (What kid doesn’t want to do that?) Secondly, I was bringing his favorite meal of all time—hot dogs. Thirdly, Dillon would finally learn how to catch fish. Then finally, we were using my new van to the full extent it was created for. It not only came with an electronic dashboard, electric front seats, front and rear air conditioning, and an automatic start, but best of all both rows of the backseats could be folded down and made into a full-length bed! This was my dream of owning an RV but without the cost.

I checked the weekend weather beforehand, and as expected it was going to be perfect. Dillon and I went over our list of things to bring and did the old "Sleeping bags? Check!" routine. I made sure the trip was the perfect blend of rugged and comfortable for him by letting him bring his portable DVD and three changes of clothes in case he got dirty. With smiles on our faces we said good-bye to the other half of the fam and drove out of town.

We made it to our lake of choice by late afternoon and pulled into the parking area. Because this was a provincial park, I needed to get my overnight pass to allow us access there and acquire a camping site. Surprisingly when I arrived at the booth there was no one to be found. What was more surprising was the fact that all the campsites looked available. Now summertime in Canada generally meant that everyone went to the "lake." The lake meant any one of the hundreds of lakes within driving range. Needless to say, it was always hard to find a campground that wasn't packed full. Bewildered and not exactly sure who to pay, we simply drove into the campground and parked at the site of our choosing. We both got out of the van, looked up and down the sites, but could see no one.

I figured first things first, we would get a lay of the land and check out the little tackle shop and mini grocery store nearby. So we locked up the van and walked several hundred feet to the store. When we arrived at the store it was closed and packed up tight. Then we walked over to the tackle shop. It, too, was locked up tight. This was another unusual phenomenon. Shaking my head and unsure of what to think, Dillon and I headed back and began unloading our camping gear.

Since we were both getting hungry, I pulled out the charcoal and fired up the camp-side grill for our long-awaited hot dogs and baked beans meal. Being deep in the woods, what I couldn't see was that the weather around us was changing. Then no sooner did the hotdogs get on the grill did we begin to feel water droplets. Surprised I stepped out from amongst the wooded area to catch a glimpse of some rather large, dark cumulous clouds. Surprised that I had heard nothing in the weather forecast mentioned about this I ran back

toward our camp to inform Dillon of the coming rains. As luck would have it, the heavens opened and the rain poured. In an effort to save dinner, I scooped the half-cooked weenies off of the grill, grabbed our camping gear and along with my boy, we frantically piled into the back of my van. Taking full advantage of camping life, and tossing all etiquette aside, we scarfed down the cold weenies and ate the beans straight out of the can while waiting for the rains to stop. Unfortunately they never did. It continued to rain all evening and well into the night. Doing our best to accommodate, we watched classic Disney movies together and filled our faces with junk food until we fell asleep.

As morning came the sun crested over the trees without a cloud in the sky. I figured we would get an early start to the day in hopes of making up for our rain-soaked night. As we jumped out of the van and onto the muddy grounds, I was surprised to not see anyone else around. Together we walked over to the little convenience shop so that I could grab a fishing license. The shop was still closed. I figured that if we were to get caught for fishing without a required license, then I had a great excuse as to why.

Dillon and I hurried back to the van and grabbed our fishing gear. With rods and tackle boxes in hand we made our way over to the lake. The lake was a beautiful blue and crystal clear. We were surprised to not see any boats on the water, but we figured it was because we had gotten up so early in the morning. So with much anticipation I strung our hooks and gave my son fishing lesson 101 before we started. I taught him all the little tricks of casting and reeling, and told him I would help him bring in his first catch if he needed help. Soon the two of us, father and son, were the proud fishermen casting and reeling into the beautiful calm waters.

Line after line we cast. Line after line we reeled in nothing. I encouraged my son to stay consistent and to keep at it until he got a bite. However, the longer we fished the wearier we became. In an effort to increase our chances, I changed lures, lines, and locations. Nothing. I added marshmallows and worms. Nothing. After laboring for close to two hours I longed for catching even seaweed. But

nothing. This was all too weird. No boats. No people. No fish. Something was wrong about this place.

With both Dillon and I frustrated we headed back to the campsite so that we could throw the football. After a few rounds we walked back to the grocery store to see who was around. Nobody. By this time Dillon's feet were getting muddy and wet and he was no longer in the mood for much of anything but sitting in the van. Hoping to keep things upbeat, I decided to crack open breakfast and discuss life as it pertains to a seven-year-old. We managed to use up another hour of sitting around talking and eating. Then, in a last-ditch effort, I decided to grab our fishing lines and head back to the lake, this time picking another spot. Dillon and I cast our lines for another forty minutes but caught nothing. Not even a bite. By this time I felt like it was of no use. We were out of bait, almost out of food, and had nothing left to do.

We sat in the back of the van, looking at each other. My poor son was incredibly bored, and his poor dad was incredibly dumbfounded. I asked him if he wanted to fish again. Nope. I asked him if he wanted to tour the area. Nope. I asked him if he wanted to go home. Yep. Well, all was not lost. We did get to hang out together and I did teach him how to fish. We packed up our things, straightened up the back of the van, and started our trek home. This had to be one of the strangest lakes I had ever been to.

Before church began the next morning, while still dumbfounded over our weekend experience, I explained the strange lake phenomena to my friends. They were almost as surprised to hear my story as we were in experiencing it. When asked what lake we visited, my friends all burst in laughter at my answer.

"Shian, that's an alkaline lake. All the fish are dead there. Everyone knows that!"

Everyone except me, of course.

Mark 8:17–19 (NCV): "Knowing what they were talking about, Jesus asked them, 'Why are you talking about not having bread? Do you still not see or understand? Are

your minds closed? You have eyes, but you don't really see. You have ears, but you don't really listen. Remember when I divided five loaves of bread for the five thousand? How many baskets did you fill with leftover pieces of food?"

How I managed to pick the only known alkaline lake in a province of 93,000 lakes remains a mystery to me until this day. Have you ever royally messed something up that shouldn't have been that hard to mess up? These verses pick up on the story of Jesus and His disciples crossing the Sea of Galilee right after He miraculously fed over four thousand people. They walked away with seven human-sized baskets of leftovers, but somehow the disciples managed to only take one small loaf on the boat with them. Once it was discovered, it was nothing shy of a mutiny amongst the disciples to which I could only imagine. They messed up and were bad stewards of the excess God had given. But all of that didn't seem to faze Jesus. He did get upset with them but not for their mistake. He got upset with them because of their perspective.

We all make mistakes. What matters in life is what we do with the mistake. Instead of camping out with the problem, admit you're wrong, learn from it, and move on. If you dwell on your mistakes, you either end up blaming others or blaming yourself. That's a surefire recipe for giving up. Remember, there's always bigger fish to fry someplace else. Pack up and move on. That's why you cannot afford to give up.

Never give up.

UNIDENTIFIED FLYING OBJECTS

Suddenly it felt as though I wasn't the only one watching.

I began wondering if I was watching them, or were they watching me?

I have always had a bend toward sci-fi. As a kid, one of the greatest things about going to school was coming home and watching *Star Trek* on my local television station at 4:30 p.m. There were some days when I would imagine myself as Captain Kirk and pretend that the *Starship Enterprise* left me on earth to evaluate the habits of my school classmates. Oddly enough I only reported back on which girls I thought were pretty. Consider me the typical school kid with a great imagination.

Now let's fast forward twenty years. By the turn of this century I was in dire need of some extra money. My job as a youth minister in Canada meant a very fixed income with little to no time for doing anything but full-time ministry. Besides an eight-hour workday, I was required to attend three services per week, three 6:30 a.m. prayer times per week, and attend 90 percent of the special events held by the church or school. So anything outside of church life meant it had to be prioritized and scheduled, otherwise it would never happen. If I was to find another means of income, then it was going to happen late at night or early in the morning. The only job I could see fitting into my regular routine was delivering newspapers. Delivering papers wasn't exactly my cup of tea, so with a little reluctance I submitted an application as the neighborhood paperboy and was accepted. For three hundred dollars per month, over the next three and a half months I was responsible to deliver one hundred newspapers by 6:00 a.m. every morning, six mornings per week.

On one such morning, I was awakened at 4:00 a.m. to the sound of my alarm blaring. I had slept in my long underwear that night since the insulation in the bedroom walls were having a hard time holding back the frigid temperatures of another Saskatchewan winter at forty below zero. Half asleep and partially frozen, I pulled myself out from under the covers and headed to the bathroom to wash my face and hopefully ignite my brain cells. I was actually looking forward to delivering papers this particular morning since my best friend promised to come help. As the water splashed on my face, my brain engaged as I had hoped. With the family still asleep, I quickly put on my double layers, suited myself in snow gear with all the fixin's, and headed out the door. Like clockwork my buddy pulled his car up to the house as I stepped out on the porch. Thankful for our friendship, with our routine high-five we headed down the street to begin the mission.

Aside from the frigid temperatures, I enjoyed the early morning delivery routine. It gave me time to think, pray, and do something that required little to no mental input. Not to mention, my paper route was quite easy. Sidewalks lined each and every home along with the majority of homes being built close together. One of my favorite moments of the job, besides being done, was stopping at the city's edge to star gaze. With arctic-like temperatures and clear skies, the celestial expanse could be seen for miles. As was my custom, I would stand still for several minutes, enjoying the view in complete silence. Lighting the sky were thousands and thousands of twinkling stars. I would locate the North Star, both the Big and Little Dipper, and in this particular instance the strange lights advancing toward me from the west.

Flying at the speed like that of a satellite were five starlike objects traveling in what appeared to be perfect horizontal formation. Perplexed with their organization and how they were able to travel so closely together as if in unison, I watched eagerly as the cluster quickly approached our city limits. My mind began racing as to what this could be. It was far too high for an airplane. It was far too fast for a star and yet far too slow for a meteorite. There were no chances of

five orbiting satellites being able to travel that close and be in perfect formation. Was this a military exercise? If so, how was each craft illuminated so brightly that they simulated the same intensity as that of the adjacent stars? It made no sense. Raising my head with anticipation of the flyover, the five unidentified flying objects came to a standstill.

Silence. I stood alone in the frigid air and stared. There was no sound of a jet engine nor any indication of propulsion. There were no similarities to that of a hovering craft and yet the unidentified lights were hovering. All five objects remaining in perfect formation had simply stopped moving. Suddenly it felt as though I wasn't the only one watching. I began wondering if I was watching them, or were they watching me? I pulled off all my headgear in hopes of hearing better. Nothing. Without warning, the "star" farthest to my left quickly shot to the south and disappeared in less than a second. Then in a fraction of a second, one by one each of the other "stars" followed the action of the first, disappearing to the south. I stood speechless. Feeling my lips and eyelashes beginning to freeze, I put my hat and scarf back on while I scanned the skies for more visitors. Nothing.

I have no idea what I saw that day or what it could be. It might have been some new fandangle government aircraft that the U.S. had been testing, but to my knowledge any jet-like propulsion comes with the requirement of sound. My best guess over the years was that I had seen angels. Angels would explain the self-illumination, the lack of engine noise, and the ability to travel as fast as they did. It would also explain the feeling I was left with that cold and frigid morning. Something or someone was definitely watching over me.

Psalm 91:10–11 (NCV): "Nothing bad will happen to you; no disaster will come to your home. He has put his angels in charge of you to watch over you wherever you go."

This is where things get weirdly interesting for this sci-fi guy. Over the years as I have researched similar stories of angelic "starlike"

visitations in which people have had with seeing five lights in the sky, they too mentioned feeling as though they were being 'watched over'. Searching numerology within the Bible, the number five has always been associated with God's grace. It infers a special type of grace or anointing, preparing one for what was about to come. Looking back at the time of my encounter, I had no idea that around the corner my life and ministry were about to be dramatically changed forever.

It's easy to get so wrapped up in all of life's issues that we forget one simple truth: we're being watched. Better put, we're being watched over. God has given or charged certain angels with the responsibility of watching over us to ensure we make it to the place of fulfilling all that He has called for us to be. God our Father has a vested interest in seeing that nothing or no one stops that from happening. That's why we shouldn't give up. Never let someone or something cause you to stop short of everything God has called you to be. That's why you cannot afford to give up.

Never give up.

EUROPEAN COMMUNION

With anticipation and eagerness for my chance to get up and speak, I quickly tilted my head back and drank the small communion glass empty.

I was finally feeling tired around the same time as the plane descended into Lisbon, Portugal. Believing I had covered all my bases before taking the long international flight, I drugged myself with melatonin as I boarded at midnight before departing from New York. Having never taken the herbal wonder before, I was unaware it would spark an allergic reaction lasting the next nine hours of my flight. The allergic reaction caused melatonin to be the equivalent of caffeine in my bloodstream. Now with a full day of meetings ahead, I was short an entire night's sleep.

Upon clearing customs, we were picked up by our hosts and driven around the city. We checked into a quaint hotel room and given just enough time to change our clothes and load back into the vehicle to head to the evening meeting. Over the next several days our schedule was chock full of meetings, eating, meeting strangers, and more meetings. I had grown to looking forward to the coming Sunday, as I was given the opportunity to minister at a young church in Spain.

During our week of late nights and long days, I was given a personal interpreter by the name of Leto. Leto could apparently interpret seven different languages so long as he had half a dozen espresso shots to start his morning. During the week I put Leto's skill to the test when I taught a theater full of churchgoers the importance of yielding, or submitting to one another in love. Unfortunately Leto translated the word, 'submit' in Portuguese to mean "to whip or beat into," which caused no small stir with the people. Since my message was a wash, I ended up spending the rest of my session, squishing

cockroaches on the stage as Leto argued with the bilingual attendees seated in the auditorium.

I was delighted when Sunday finally came. Upon arriving in Spain we pulled our car up to a small storefront property in a city not far from the Portugal border. With only minutes before the service began we were warmly greeted by a Spanish-speaking pastor and his wife, who then quickly ushered us to our front-row seats. Once the service got underway I was happy to see the room jam-packed with precious smiling faces eager to hear, what I soon learned to be, their first guest speaker from North America. As the worship team wrapped up their final song, the pastor took to the podium. Ready and waiting to hear my name called, I took a moment to thumb through my notes. I couldn't wait for my first chance to preach in a church overseas.

Because of the language barrier between the people and me, I had no idea what was being said by the pastor, nor the reason why he was taking so long to introduce me. After twenty minutes had passed, I noticed the ushers coming forward from the back of the room carrying stainless steel offering plates filled with chunks of bread. Putting my notes away, I realized then that it was time for communion. As the plate passed by we each took a morsel of bread and hung on to it for another ten minutes, waiting for the instruction from the pastor to partake. Nervously and without thinking, I successfully rolled the piece of bread between my fingers into a perfect marble-sized ball. No sooner did I finish rolling it did the pastor give the instruction to pass our bread to the person on our right. As I handed my newly fashioned marble of dough to Leto, I smiled and apologized. However, I couldn't help but start laughing when he began eating it.

Within moments the usher returned to hand out the "cup" or mini cups of grape juice. This time the pastor barely said two words before he gave the instruction to drink. With anticipation and eagerness for my chance to get up and speak, I quickly tilted my head back and drank the small communion glass empty. Being a church kid all my life, I have probably partaken in several thousand communion services over the years, but never once have I ever had

anything BUT grape drink in a service. What I didn't account for that day was having communion in a European church service, where wine was the only kind of grape drink they offered.

I'm obviously no connoisseur of wine, seeing as how I have chosen not to drink the stuff. But looking back on that day, I don't believe that was pure wine they were serving, either. It burned more like what I imagine a hard liquor would. To boot, Leto and I missed our chance at breakfast. Having digested only a tiny morsel of bread, this virgin to alcohol felt the instant effects of European communion. Simultaneously the pastor called on me to speak. The minutes that followed were mostly a blur as I watched the room spin from one side of my head to the other. As I struggled to introduced myself, with a big smile Leto leaned over and said, "That wasn't grape juice!"

Fortunately the spinning ended and the two of us managed to make it through the service. To this day I don't remember much of what transpired, nor do I remember what my message was about. I do remember the people coming up to thank me and a few of the ushers being completely inebriated by the end of service. Whether they were all happy because of the wine, God, or my message, I was thankful to have had the chance to be there and to preach to a nation I had never been to.

Ephesians 3:20–21 (GW): “Glory belongs to God, whose power is at work in us. By this power he can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.”

Have you ever felt like giving up shortly after you got started? Have you ever felt like you bit off more than you can chew? That was how I felt that day when the room was spinning. I felt as though I had lost control of the very things I worked hard to be in control of. By the time I reached the stage, I realized that I had put so much dependency on my abilities that without them I felt helpless and useless. I wanted so hard to fix myself and gain control of the situation that when I couldn't, I was flooded with the feelings of giving up. That's when I reminded myself what I believe and know.

More than half the battle in winning is in believing and knowing. Believing you can is what sets your course. Knowing you can, knowing that God is at work in you to do beyond what you think or imagine, is the fuel that keeps you going. That's why you cannot afford to give up.

Never give up.

I SURVIVED THE RADICAL FANATICAL SABBATICAL

There I stood, speechless. Surrounding the entire island, our once three-foot channel of trickling water was now a full-sized river flowing at capacity. To make matters worse, our canoes were nowhere to be found.

I should have guessed it. Before embarking on our annual teenage canoe trip, I thought it humorous to have shirts printed that read, “I survived the Radical Fanatical Sabbatical.” I had no idea of how much of a reality that would be. It was now the third summer to host our annual youth canoe trip. To change things up a little I decided to have the senior girls come along with my female staff. So as not to weary the girls with lengthy portaging, I thought it best to spend five days floating down the nearby river. It would give everyone the pleasure of sightseeing and would be a great introduction to the art of canoeing for the newbies. My plan involved beginning near the dam, a good fifty miles upstream, with the hopes of ending the week by floating directly into the city limits. With a team of twenty-one in tow, my chaperones and I loaded up the gear, teenagers, and canoes and drove the distance to our expected drop zone. Everything was set for a successful trip, or so I thought anyways.

As was my custom, I spent the first hour doing in-boat training. We discussed technique, canoe flips, emergency precautions, along with tips on avoiding both sun and heat exposure. Since most of the boys were veteran canoeists, we were able to get through the training portion rather quickly. Our first mission was to cover a solid five miles. The river current traveled at three miles per hour, so given the weighted crafts and a few minor inexperienced canoeists I figured our first day to be no more than three hours of work. As we launched forward I quickly found myself wrong on two things. First

off, pound for pound our inexperienced girls proved just as strong as our experienced boys. And second, I had not anticipated the sudden uptick in wind speed.

Within minutes we were battling whitecaps. The winds blew at us so strongly that it appeared as though the river was flowing against us. The harder we paddled, the harder the wind blew. As in previous years, to avoid capsizing we challenged our headwind with strength and veracity, hitting each of the waves head on with sheer determination and force. However, the winds refused to let up. For the next four hours we fought tirelessly. As our afternoon began turning to evening and for fear of wearing the entire team down on the first day, I picked a location on one of the nearby sand beds for our campsite. We had covered just over a mile.

With the dawn of a new morning, the sun shone brightly without a trace of wind. On either side of the river the shoreline was marked with rolling hills, deer, and every type of bird imaginable. It was going to be a beautiful day and thankfully a much easier one. With spirits and enthusiasm high, we set sail just after 9:00 a.m., ready to make up for the time lost from the day before. With less than an hour underway, we followed the meandering river around the first bend of hills. To my surprise it appeared as though the dry portion of the riverbed was getting wider while the width of the river grew more and more narrow. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. Long story short, we were running out of river. The half-mile-wide body of water we had set sail in just an hour earlier was now becoming a three-foot wide tiny stream. Instead of using our paddles to push water back as you're supposed to, we used our paddles to push off against the sand. It seemed to do the trick until all at once our canoes came to a grinding halt. Unbelievably we had run aground with less than two inches of water beneath us.

Perplexed as we were, it was all quite comical. Who would have thought we would run out of water? Jumping out of our canoes, all that could be seen for a mile ahead was a riverbed of sand. To add to our newfound dilemma, the heat from the sun began burning our skin. Wasting no time, I gave the orders to continue onward and

designated one of the boys from each team to pull a canoe through the tiny channel as the rest of us walked alongside. Oddly enough almost every 200 feet the tiny channel would, without warning, suddenly drop to over ten feet deep, plunging the lead canoe-puller well underwater. That was our signal to get back in the canoes and press on until the channel shrunk. Unfortunately we also couldn't help but laugh at the poor teen pulling the lead, who ended up drenched from head to toe! This cycle continued for the next two hours until the riverbed finally deepened.

Shortly after the lunch hour I spotted a decent-sized sandbar to rest and have a much needed PB&J break. As we disembarked for lunch, my chaperones handed out the sandwiches as I studied my topographical map. It appeared that any hope of reaching the city by Friday had quickly begun to fade. The sun was beginning to wear us down and the added hassle of getting in and out of the canoes was taking its toll. Luckily the channel of river ahead looked to be a good one hundred feet wide. While the team was preoccupied with eating their lunch, my preoccupation had shifted downstream where I was watching a rather mysterious and ominous array of low-level clouds rapidly approaching. At first glance it looked as though one gigantic wall of white was stretching from the clouds to earth spanning the entire width of the river. As peculiar as it was, I couldn't help but notice that it was growing in both size and speed. With less than a mile downriver, the white wall had begun to engulf everything in its path. It was then that I realized that the white wall I had been watching was a powerful hailstorm heading directly for us.

In a frenzy I began shouting out orders to grab the tarp and flip the canoes over to protect our gear from pending damage. Frantically we packed ourselves together like a can of sardines underneath the only tarp we had, all twenty-one of us. No sooner than we did, the pelting of marble-sized hail accompanied by gale-force winds began beating down on us relentlessly. Those of us holding the tarp down on the outer ring began shouting from the painful sting of hail pelting our bare legs. For the next five minutes we laughed and squealed in pain, as this all seemed so

unbelievable. Once the hail turned to a classic downpour, we lifted the tarp off our heads only to see the entire countryside covered in a blanket of white. A little beaten up, we flipped our canoes back over, hopped in, and set out to continue our journey onward.

By late afternoon I was surprised to hear that two of my chaperones had enough of this trip. Exhausted, they steered their craft toward the sandy beach and were planning on somehow walking home. I couldn't believe it. I turned my canoe around and upon catching up to them I preached my first message on not giving up. With much coercion and some loving reassurance, I eventually persuaded them to rejoin us and finish our trek together. However, by this time it had been eight hours since we started our day and what lay ahead of us looked as though the river was about to narrow into another tiny channel. It was time to call it quits and I knew it. Any hope of making it to the city by Friday was officially over. As the channel of river slowed down to a trickle, I decided to call it a day before we risked any of the others wanting to bail.

Five hundred feet away in the middle of the riverbed, I noticed a tiny hill of sand with a few small trees rising from the middle of it. I figured it to be an island if the river had been flowing at full capacity. I gave instructions for everyone to grab their gear as the rest of us pulled the canoes across the sandy riverbed toward the island. Happy to be done with our exhausting day, we set up camp, cooked dinner, and told stories about our day. With dinner in our bellies we willingly headed to our tents early to call it a night, not realizing that the worst was soon upon us.

My nights' sleep was cut short when at 5:00am I was awakened by my teenage brother-in-law frantically trying to explain to me that our canoes were missing. At first I ignored him, thinking it was a prank. However, the tone of his voice, and the fact that he also mentioned that we were surrounded by water, caused me to jump out of my tent rather quickly. There I stood, speechless. Surrounding the entire island, our once three-foot-wide channel of trickling water was now a full-sized river flowing at capacity. To make matters worse, our canoes were nowhere to be found. I shook my head; the

worst of the worst had happened. At some point during the night the River Authority must have opened the dam. I had double-checked with them before ever leaving and was promised they would not be releasing water. Now I was kicking myself for not tying down the canoes and for spending the night on the riverbed instead of the beach. We were in dire trouble and I needed a solution quickly.

Grabbing the “potty shovel,” I drove the blade into the base of the hill and etched in one-foot, two-foot, and three-foot markings on the handle to gauge how quickly the water was rising. My best estimate was that the waters had already risen five feet overnight. With a sense of urgency, I awakened the rest of the group and helped everyone pack their tents and belongings in order to get us to higher ground, which wasn’t much on this small island. Going back to check the shovel, the river had already risen a foot and a half in less than thirty minutes. My guess was that we had less than three hours before being washed away. To make matters worse, we left the life jackets in the canoes. As I stood upon the highest point of the island, just two hundred feet away, lodged deep into a sandbar, rested one of our canoes. With the waters rising, I knew that any hope of us being rescued involved retrieving that lone canoe.

My swimming skills left much to be desired. To my surprise my chaperones weren’t much better. As much as I hated to, I needed a teen strong enough, experienced enough, and brave enough to swim the distance. Two of our boys, veterans of our annual canoe-trip adventures, stepped forward. Nervous to give them permission, and understanding the accountability I had to their parents should something go awry, I chose to trust their judgment seeing as how we were out of options. Circling them in prayer, I sent them into the water to retrieve the canoe. I raced back to check the status of our shovel. The water had just crossed the three-foot mark.

What took place in the following sixty minutes was nothing short of miraculous. Amidst the rising waters, the two boys reached the first canoe in record time. From there they paddled onward another thousand feet and found the second canoe. Before the hour lapsed, they had returned with four canoes out of the seven, which was

enough to get us off the island and safely onto the shore. From there I walked to the highest point of land I could find and successfully found cellular service from the only cell phone we had. Before long, our rescue team arrived to take us back home and eventually find the last remaining canoes. What should have been a tragedy ended up being one of our greatest adventures. What was prophesied on our T-shirts had truly come to pass. We survived the Radical Fanatical Sabbatical.

Mark 4:37–41 (NKJV): “And a great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that it was already filling. But He was in the stern, asleep on a pillow. And they awoke Him and said to Him, ‘Teacher, do You not care that we are perishing?’ Then He arose and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, ‘Peace, be still!’ And the wind ceased and there was a great calm. But He said to them, ‘Why are you so fearful? How is it that you have no faith?’ And they feared exceedingly, and said to one another, ‘Who can this be, that even the wind and the sea obey Him!’”

So often I have looked back at this adventure and realized how easy it would have been for us to have given up along the way. I liken it to the day the disciples were to cross the Sea of Galilee but were faced midway with driving winds and high waves. I’m sure they fought to overcome the tumult, but once it appeared that the weather was relentless they wanted to give up. That’s when they woke up Jesus. In the midst of the raging storm, they feared that God’s silence meant He didn’t care about their lives. But that’s where they were wrong. Jesus endeavored to teach them that day that faith in God will always prove greater than fear.

Perspective matters. Trouble will either bring out the best or worst in you. They reveal your fight or flight, your ability to push through or panic. Ultimately, it’s always adversity that reveals your faith in God. Never giving up means we must keep our eyes on the Lord and

believe that there's a way through. There's always a way through.
That's why you cannot afford to give up.

Never give up.

ME, THE ILLEGAL IMMIGRANT

I was now classified by the US government as an illegal immigrant. I was to be detained and deported back to Canada on the first plane out. No questions asked.

Texas. It was like nothing this Canadian had ever experienced. The four of us were moving to America to pastor a church in the small city of Borger, Texas, home of fifteen thousand, which included dogs, cats, and cattle. We spent months in preparation for this move. There was so much to do before the trip and so much to pack. Desiring to take as much as we could, I rented the biggest truck I could find.

The day prior to our scheduled two-thousand-mile drive, one of the men in the new church I was about to pastor flew up to our Canadian city along with his son in order to drive the rental truck down to our new Texas home. Grateful and excited that this was finally taking place, we said our good-byes to friends, family, and neighbors. As the sun rose early the following morning, we began with a four-hundred-mile trek to the United States border. Since Border Patrol agents and I have had our ongoing issues with each other, I planned on this stop taking some time. Upon arrival and as expected, the Border agents poured painstakingly up and down, inside and out, over my immigration paperwork, trying to find a loophole they could catch me and my wife on. With a final shrug, which looked like that of remorse, the agent stamped my documents, verifying my landed immigrant status while muttering a brief, "Welcome to America," as he handed me back a portion of the documents. It was official. I had legally entered the United States. Or at least I thought so.

Upon arriving at our new home, I had no idea how quickly the Texas "honeymoon" would end. I expected things to go smoothly for the first month or two before diving into any type of big issues, but I

was wrong. The day we arrived at our new home and saw the condition of our furniture, we went into shock. Apparently the rental truck had a separation between the floor bed and the exhaust, causing our furniture and boxes to be filled with diesel soot. The rental company sent a cleaning agency out to the house, but to repair the damage done by the soot was futile. The rental company then ordered that I pay \$1500 for the cleaners, and when I refused, by the end of the week I was slapped with a lawsuit.

By midweek I received a letter from Canada's revenue agency. With my leaving the country they decided to conduct an audit of the last seven years of tax returns that I had filed. When reviewing the returns, they found a discrepancy in my numbers and estimated that I owed their government over \$16,000 dollars. The letter demanded I repay the amount within thirty days.

To add to my chain of dilemma's, by the time the weekend arrived the parishioner who had helped me drive the truck down, in tears, confessed that he didn't like me. He had wished to be in the city of Amarillo where his former pastor was. Not wishing ill will and understanding that the transition from the former pastor to me was tough, I willingly released him of any obligation. Unfortunately he was also the principal of the Christian school I inherited. I had less than a month before school started to find his replacement.

By the beginning of my second week, I received a rather large packet of documents from the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services. Happy and excited to finally receive my official landed immigrant status, I ripped into the manila packet. Stuffed inside the envelope was both the originals and copies of all my application papers, along with copies of all the government's paperwork. I thumbed through each and every page slowly and somewhat spellbound with confusion, as stamped on each and every page in big, red bold letters were the words "Rejected." As I read the attached cover page, I was completely dumbfounded. The approval for me seeking my landed immigration status was denied. Fortunately, attached to the documents was a letter requesting my presence in Dallas at the Immigration and Naturalization building,

whereby I could plead my case. Now, in my first two weeks of living in Texas, I was falsely sued, falsely charged, losing parishioners, and was no longer welcomed in the United States. This was not going well.

I was nervous. With my briefcase in hand stocked full of documents, I waited patiently at the INS office for my case name to be called. Behind a wall of bulletproof glass sat six agents, all dressed in long-sleeved white shirts with ties. From the looks of everyone else seated in the room to that of the agents, I started feeling that this was more like a trial hearing than it was a meeting to state my case. After a long and boring hour of waiting, the loudspeaker announced my number. Upon greeting the agent I set my briefcase upon the counter in front of me, released the clasps, and passed under the bulletproof glass my stack of rejected documents. Beady-eyed and speechless the agent simply stared at me. I told him who I was, my appreciation for them setting this meeting, and as briefly as possible told him how this was some sort of mistake. At that point the agent looked down at his computer screen.

“What are you doing here, Mr. Klassen?” he asked.

I took a deep breath and began to explain the lengths to which I had taken while living in Canada to ensure that all the application paperwork had been in order. As I began to explain he began to type on his computer. Before I could get very far in my monologue the agent interrupted me.

“I said, what are you doing here, Mr. Klassen?”

With lips pursed I cocked my head back with a rather puzzled look. Could he not hear me through the glass? Was I not giving him the answer he was asking for? I began telling my story again, but this time a lot slower, in hopes of helping the agent understand more clearly. I didn’t get more than five words out when he leaped up from his chair. Pointing his finger at me through the glass, he shouted, “You’re not supposed to be here! Wait right there and DON’T MOVE!”

Running to a side door, the agent slid his ID badge through the wall mechanism and exited quite quickly. Bewildered, I stood there speechless. I looked to my right and left at the other agents, but it seemed as though none of them had heard what was said. I tilted my head to get a look at his computer screen and could see something blinking on his screen that looked a lot like the words, "Deportation." Quickly I reached under the glass to grab my papers, threw them back into my briefcase, and ran out the door to the parking lot where my brother-in-law was waiting. With the likeness of a full-blown action movie, I jumped into the passenger seat while yelling at my brother-in-law to "punch it" out of the parking lot. As fast as he could he raced out of the lot and onto to the adjacent interstate. I quickly realized what this meeting was all about. They weren't interested in my prepared speech. No, what they were interested in was my deportation. They wanted me out of the country and had planned on detaining me that afternoon.

By the next day my good friend in Canada, who had connections with their immigration services, informed me of what I had feared. I was now classified by the US government as an illegal immigrant. I was to be detained and deported back to Canada on the first plane out. No questions asked.

Over the next five years, I skillfully managed to dodge white cargo vans. I spent months filling out copious amounts of paperwork, along with paying an extravagant amount in fees in hopes of fixing the problem. What I was unaware of was that the problem had originated that summer day I drove across the American border. The Border Patrol agents mistakenly used the wrong acceptance stamp on the paperwork I had handed them. Instead of stamping my papers under a spousal visa, they stamped it as a work visa intended for undocumented Hispanics currently living in the country, which happened to be a program that had ended just two days before I crossed the border. It resulted in the immediate rejection of my once-approved application paperwork and the reason for them demanding my deportation. However, by the end of the five years I had won the battle. I was eventually welcomed warmly into the

United States and was finally handed my landed immigrant status. Interestingly the government disavowed any knowledge of my previous documentation and had swiped clean my former case from their databases.

Acts 27:22–23 (NKJV): “And now I urge you to take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship.”

I urge you to take heart. This was Paul’s encouragement to the men aboard a ship doomed to sink in the Adriatic Sea. This was also a source of encouragement for me more times than I could imagine during those first five years. Eventually the rental company that sued me in my first week settled on a reasonable amount. Canada’s revenue agency sent a letter of apology for the mistake they made, and eventually I became a full-fledged United States citizen.

That’s why we must take heart and not give up. I heard it once said that sometimes victory only comes when we outlast the storm. Meaning that in order to win certain battles, it requires us to stay put, stay in faith, and stay the course. There are times our journey requires a higher level of endurance in order to make it through. It’s possible that even our ‘modus operandi’, or the ship we’re sailing on, begins taking on more water than we can bail. That’s when life starts feeling scary. That’s the time you grab hold of what is true, and you don’t let go. Sometimes victory only comes when we outlast the storm. That’s why you cannot afford to give up.

Never give up.

THE IMPOSSIBLE DREAM

The surprise came early the next morning, when the website showed that the truck had been sold. I almost fell out of my chair when it showed that the purchaser was me.

It was the sweetest truck I had ever seen. I grabbed my laptop and raced into Dillon's classroom to show him the latest online offer I had found from a dealership in Dallas. It was a midnight black 2008 Lincoln Mark IV, loaded with every bell and whistle any true truckman could want. There was just one problem. The asking price was \$28,500, which was more than I wanted to spend.

Once my son finished his day, the two of us combed through every picture and options included with the purchase. The dealership had posted the truck as an auction to attract would-be buyers such as myself in hopes someone would place a decent bid. The only problem was that I neither had the money nor the credit to offer anything more than \$16,000 for the vehicle. After ten minutes of drooling, I decided it was time to move on.

"Dad, you should place a bid," Dillon said excitedly.

I wanted to, but I was too skeptical and reluctant. I couldn't imagine anyone accepting my bid with it being so low. Not to mention, it would probably spark a phone call from the dealership followed by a sales pitch. No thanks! My son, however, wasn't backing down. Giving into my son's coercion, I reluctantly entered a bid for a whopping \$12,500. The surprise came early the next morning, when the website showed that the truck had been sold. I almost fell out of my chair when it showed that the purchaser was me.

Sitting in my inbox was an email acknowledging the truck was indeed mine along with a contact number to set up payment and

delivery. I quickly picked up the phone and dialed the number. A lady answered the call, asking me to describe the vehicle I had purchased. She then placed me on hold, letting me know that someone from the sales department would be speaking with me. The phone crackled and then someone with extremely broken English did his best to thank me for the purchase and explain the details of conducting the transaction. They informed me that as soon as I wired the funds to the dealership, they would ship the vehicle to me. I tried to get him to explain to me as to why they were selling the truck so cheap. The man on the phone went over the rules of the auction and that since there was no reserve bid, the truck was mine. I asked if it had an actual engine, or if it was salvaged. Once again, he did his best to explain everything and told me that he was also going to give me free shipping. This was too good to be true.

With a promise to call the man back, I placed another call to my banker. She accessed the auction and investigated the vehicle. The bank had set the value of the truck at well over \$30,000 which led my banker in asking me the same questions I asked the man with broken English. Cautious but curious, she asked that I sit tight until she did some more investigating. In less than an hour I was surprised to hear back from her.

Soon my hopes and dreams of owning this black beauty were dashed. The online dealership selling the truck was real, but the auction portion of it was false. With help from the FBI, they discovered that someone overseas had copied the dealership's website but created a multiple web address so that when you clicked on a vehicle from the legitimate site, you would be redirected to the bogus site. The hackers/scammers were selling new and used vehicles for pennies on the dollar then asking the lucky winners to wire funds followed by an empty promise to ship. My banker informed me that the actual dealership would be calling me later that day with an apology.

By late afternoon I received the promised call from the used cars sales manager. We had a good conversation about the prank I might have fallen for, followed by a discussion about the truck. He said that

the sticker price was still \$28,500, but for all the problems I encountered the dealership was willing to negotiate with me if I wanted to make them a reasonable offer. I informed him of how much I had been approved for, which ended our conversation rather abruptly. The sales rep was disappointed he couldn't make a sale and I was disappointed in how it all turned out. It was at that point I had decided to give car hunting a break for a while.

Two weeks later I received another call from the used cars sales manager inquiring as to how much I would give them for his truck. When I reminded him of how much I had been approved for, he was quick to explain the need for the company to sell the vehicle soon. Hoping to offer me the 'deal of a lifetime' he lowered the price to \$25,000. I told him I couldn't budge and thanked him for the call.

Another two weeks passed and again I received a call. This time, he offered to sell the truck for \$22,500. I told him that it was a deal too good to miss out on, but it was also a deal that was much higher than what I could afford. Once again I thanked him for the call.

No sooner than another month had passed did he call again. His price was firm at \$22,500 and my approval letter was firm at \$16,500. With either parties being able to budge I thanked him once again for the call, however, this time before hanging up, he asked my profession. When I told him I was the pastor of a church, he immediately began to apologize for pushing me so hard to buy. He understood that my income was limited and apologized for wasting my time. We both laughed and talked about church for a few minutes before I thanked him for his willingness to work with me. To my surprise he called me back two days later.

"Pastor, I am willing to accept \$16,500 for the truck. If you can fly out to Dallas tomorrow morning with a cashier check in hand, it's yours."

To say I was shocked was an understatement! I must have asked the manager a dozen times if I had heard him right. Ecstatic and overjoyed, I called my banker to draft the check and booked airline tickets for my daughter and me to Dallas. By noon the next day, I drove away the proud owner in the truck of my dreams.

2 Corinthians 9:10 (*The Message*): “This most generous God who gives seed to the farmer that becomes bread for your meals is more than extravagant with you.”

Sometimes we give up too early expecting God's best. I'm a firm believer in setting plans and counting the cost before you build, so to speak. But if there's one thing I've learned in life, it is to never let our limitations be God's limitations. For me the truck was far more than what I could have dreamed and far beyond what I imagined I could buy. It was extravagant.

Never give up on accomplishing the impossible and never give up on believing in God desiring to make that happen for you. He can do exceedingly abundantly above what we can ask or think. That's why you cannot afford to give up.

Never give up.

THE INVISIBLE HIDDEN TRAP

In less than three minutes the entire neighborhood heard the firetruck blaring down my street. So much for trying to keep this as low key as possible, I thought.

When I lived in Canada, anyone could tell that the fall season was around the corner since the leaves started changing color by late August, followed by the first freeze within the next few weeks. In West Texas, however, the beginning of the fall season was a whole different story. Since tree leaves hung on through most of October, the only way to tell it was fall was by the dropping temperatures in the evening and by my fruitless mulberry trees.

I was privileged in my city to have two giant mulberry trees, one in the front yard and the other in the backyard. For those unfamiliar with the weather in West Texas, as my best friend put it, it's best compared to a high-velocity convection oven. Most trees either wouldn't withstand the high heat and drought conditions or they would be toppled by the usual thirty- to fifty-mile-per-hour winds. That's why in our town, having a well-established tree on your property was both a privilege and a commodity!

Without fail I would awaken one late October morning to having all the leaves fall off both humungous fruitless mulberry trees, thus signifying that fall had come! There would be no warning or changing in leaf colors to signify the onset of this spectacular event. One would simply wake up to what I best estimate a good twenty thousand five-inch leaves covering everything you own. That was the day you pulled out the rake and, in the evenings, put on a jacket.

Then came the heat exchanger. Everyone had one if you planned on surviving in Texas. The unit doubled as an air conditioner during the day and a heater for when the house cooled at night. When things got too chilled at night, you could always rely on the

‘emergency heat’ to kick in if necessary. Once the leaves fell from my trees, the need for emergency heat was generally around the corner.

As the alarm clock rang, on one cold October morning, I didn’t want to get up. It was my Thursday off and since the bedroom felt much warmer than usual, I figured the emergency heat must have kicked in. With the bed feeling incredibly comfortable, I turned over, closed my eyes, and began drifting back to sleep. My wife was sound asleep. I listened to hear if my kids were awake and getting ready for school, but the house remained silent. Fighting against what my body wanted, I sat up realizing I had better awaken my kids. I fought trying to open my eyes, not to mention my head was now feeling like it weighed one hundred pounds. Startled with my rising, my dog woke from its bed and began to heave. Impulsively I reached down, picked her up, and rushed her outside to my backyard. I watched as the poor dog threw up on the grass and could barely stand. As my heart raced from the sudden rush of adrenaline, I began losing my balance and felt as though I was going to pass out. What ensued was an incredible migraine. This was not the way I wanted to start my day.

Carrying our little dog back into the house, I walked to the bottom of the stairs that led to the kid’s bedrooms and gave out the usual “rise and shine” yell that all school kids love to hear. Oddly there was no response. I looked down at my watch for the time. The first bell was less than an hour away and by the sounds of it, my kids were still fast asleep. I called for them again. Nothing. By the time I ran up the stairs, my headache was so painful that I felt as though I was going to pass out. Upon reaching my kids’ rooms, I found both Dillon and Cassie in a deep sleep. I yelled out my morning greeting again, but still no movement. Starting with Dillon, I went over and shook him out of his sleep. When he awoke, he looked like he had not slept in days. Complaining of a bad headache he got up and made his way to the bathroom. “Up and at ’em,” I yelled as I came into Cassie’s room. She, too, was sound asleep. I gave her a quick shake until she awoke. Her first words were about her head and stomach both

hurting. Oblivious to the similarities, I encouraged them both to get up and have some breakfast.

I returned to my bedroom to find my wife still fast asleep. Gently, I woke her up to let her know about the kids not feeling well. To my surprise she awoke with a bad headache. With the household migraine count now four for four, I had enough brain power to deduce that something wasn't right. Imagining it to be food poisoning, I mulled over everything we ate the night before. It didn't make sense. I headed to the kitchen to start breakfast for the kids, only to find my wife racing quickly behind me and out the patio doors to our backyard. She was throwing up. Slumping into the patio chair, she sat outside pale and exhausted. Then the dog followed her lead and began throwing up again. After bringing my wife a blanket I returned to the kitchen, making ready cereal and toast for the kids. Pumping them up with both ibuprofen and acetaminophen, I drove them to school. I returned home to find both my wife and dog still in the backyard, practically half-dead, in the patio chair. Something was very wrong.

Getting on my desktop computer, I quickly searched for common factors linking multiple people having headaches and throwing up. My search landed on one result: carbon monoxide poisoning. With strong warnings to contact the local fire department, I quickly dialed the number. In less than three minutes the entire neighborhood heard the firetruck blaring down my street. So much for trying to keep this as low key as possible, I thought. Once in the house, the fire chief sent two of the men to the backyard to check on my wife, asked me to step out of the house, and then proceeded to check the upstairs with a tester in hand.

As I stepped outside, two more firemen were climbing a ladder to my roof. Soon my elderly neighbors began pulling out their lawn chairs as I imagined this to be the most excitement they had seen in years. Within moments, the fire chief emerged from my house to show me the results. With a reading of almost 400 ppm, he said it was a miracle that nobody had died. He described to me how when carbon monoxide hits the maximum sustainable level, you pass out

and eventually quit breathing. The chief went on to explain that our house levels were four times higher than what he had ever seen. I thanked the fire department for coming out and then called the school to check on the kids. They, too, were feeling much better.

Psalm 91:2–3 (NCV): “I will say to the Lord, ‘You are my place of safety and protection. You are my God and I trust you.’ God will save you from hidden traps and from deadly diseases.”

When the firemen climbed my roof, they discovered a bird’s nest built deep within the furnace vent. The nest prohibited the exhaust gas from properly expelling, resulting in the back up of carbon monoxide. They estimated that we had been exposed to the gas for almost eight hours, which was long enough to have killed both dog and family. Unbeknownst to me, we should have all died that night. Instead God saved us from the invisible hidden trap.

Sometimes in life, we forget that God is always watching out for us. He delivers us from the snare of destruction, keeps us from terror, and covers us with His protection. David believed this so much that he put his entire trust in God to keep him. And as history reveals, God did just that. Just as He does for us today. God will never give up on us, neither will He allow the invisible hidden traps to stop us short. That’s why you cannot afford to give up.

Never give up.

THE STRANGE ODOR

As I approached the door, I focused my eyes to where he was pointing. What I saw next turned my skin five shades of blue.

The dreaded West Texas critters. Amidst the laughter from a few of my churchmen, I requested their help with installing a snake fence across the back of my wooden fence to help keep as many critters and snakes in the open field from coming in. Snakes in Texas were as common as mosquitos in Canada, and I hated them both. I was willing to adjust to this new country, new weather, and new culture, but I was unwilling to adjust to all the critters. However, by the time summer arrived after my first year, I had already seen my share of rats, mice, tarantulas, termites, brown recluse spiders, scorpions, cockroaches, and at least two different types of snakes. My snake fence proved worthless.

One Saturday afternoon after walking through my garage, I got a whiff of an unusually foul smell. Curious, I checked the small boxes of rat poison I had set up throughout the garage as it was not uncommon for there to be a dead creature of some sort decaying in them. Nothing. Since our city was home to North America's largest inland oil refinery, I figured the smell to be coming from there. When the north wind blew, the air was thick with every smell imaginable from the refinery. If the south winds blew, the smell of sulfur from the fertilizer plant filled the city. Understandably just because the garage smelled strange one particular day of the year didn't necessarily mean anything in our town. At least I thought so.

By the following week the smell within my garage worsened. Once again I combed every nook and cranny in hopes of locating what I imagined to be a dead critter. As the week stretched on I had become obsessed with tracking down this deceased rodent. I would come home from work and search. I couldn't remember when the

last time was I had searched so hard for something without finding it. Once Saturday had arrived I focused on the chores needing to be done while doing my best to ignore the garage.

By the time Dillon and I finished working in the backyard we were tired from the hot sun and ready to relax inside the cool air conditioning of the house. I stood at the back door cleaning off my dirty shoes as Dillon walked through the side door to the garage to put away the tools. With the sound of enthusiasm and awe in his voice he called my name.

“Uh, Dad. I think I found the smell!”

The distance from the side garage door to where I stood at the back door was no more than fifteen feet. There Dillon was partially holding open the door leading into the garage and staring at me with the strangest of looks.

Reluctantly I stepped off the porch and walked toward him. Instinctively, since I was thinking along the lines of rats and mice, I focused my attention towards the ground hoping to see exactly what my son had discovered. Oddly enough, Dillon was pointing upward. As I approached the door I focused my eyes to where he was pointing. What I saw next turned my skin five shades of blue.

Lodged, or squished, between the doorjamb and the door was a two-inch head of a diamondback rattlesnake. Somehow the snake had managed to work its way up one side of the open door, across the top and was working its way down the opposite side when someone unknowingly slammed the door shut on our slithery trespasser. Whoever had shut the door, managed to squish all five and a half feet of it into the door frame. It was at that point I gasped. I had never in my life seen a snake as big as this. Horrified, I wondered who in my family brushed so close to this predator without realizing it. Frightened and awestruck, Dillon and I took a moment to study the immensity of the snake before scraping it from the door.

Philippians 4:6–7 (GW): “Never worry about anything. But in every situation let God know what you need in prayers and requests while giving thanks. Then God’s peace,

which goes beyond anything we can imagine, will guard your thoughts and emotions through Christ Jesus.”

I wonder how many times in life we find ourselves brushing alongside calamity or even death, and yet manage to walk away from it? In those “I could have died” instances, do you ever find yourself creating different scenarios of what should have happened? It’s freaky, isn’t it? Sometimes it’s easy to get worked up over the near mishaps instead of seeing the situation for what it is. It was a miss.

After that day the more I focused on the monstrous venomous snake, the more weirded out I became. When I shifted my focus to how much God had watched out and protected us, the more thankful I became.

That’s why it’s important to remind ourselves that what could have happened didn’t happen, no matter how close it happened. Never let fear, worry or anxiety be allowed to paint a picture of your defeat. The way to keep your perspective centered is through prayer and thankfulness. Fear, worry and anxiety focus on one resolve, while thankfulness focuses on the big picture. That’s why you cannot afford to give up.

Never give up.

A SMUGGLER'S PRAYER

With one hand on his weapon he approached my vehicle from the passenger side and peered into the back window. As I began rolling the passenger window down, the officer cupped his hands against the glass to get a better look inside.

I think I spent more than half of my tenure in Texas driving. When you live in small city, you get used to driving everywhere in order to get anywhere. On one such occasion my kids and I were on a mission to pick my wife up at the airport in Oklahoma City, over three hours away. I packed up the kiddos in my GMC Jimmy, tossed in an overnight bag and headed east. Time-wise I knew I was going to cut it close, but I also knew the backroads had meant “pedal to the medal” if I had any hope of arriving on time.

Being new to driving the West Texas back roads, I misjudged the onslaught of cattle trucks populating the rugged single-lane highways. It appeared that the more eighteen-wheeler cattle trucks I raced around, the more I encountered. There was no end in sight. I couldn't afford another late showing in picking up the kids' mom since my last instance in Canada didn't turn out so well. Since I was focused on weaving in and out of traffic, my children were focused on watching videos and stretching out in the back of my SUV. Thankfully as we began approaching the Oklahoma state line, the trucker population began to decline. Soon enough, the road ahead was clear and long, giving me the chance to “open 'er up,” as they say in race land. With a quick glance to the right and to the left, I pushed the accelerator down as far as it would go. It was time to make haste.

Even with the “need for speed” deep in my blood, I would still consider myself cautious and in control. I don't enjoy driving

recklessly, taking corners at excessive speeds, or driving carelessly through traffic. I also do my best to adhere to all the traffic signs. Well, except for the ones that say speed limit when I'm in a hurry. However, no sooner did my 3.5-liter motor begin screaming down the highway did I see in my rearview mirror one of "Oklahoma's finest" racing up from behind. I couldn't believe it. I know for a fact that I had checked my mirrors before taking off like a madman. Reflexively I glanced down at my speedometer before engaging the brake. I was already well over the speed limit. As my vehicle began to slow, I turned on my right signal light to let the officer know my intention of pulling over. As I did I began to pray, and then began to sweat.

What was making me sweat wasn't just the fact that I was speeding. The bigger problem was the fact that I had allowed my children to play together, unbuckled, in the back of the SUV. With the police officer behind me, it was too late to tell them to climb back into their seats. Now, add to that the fact that I was still driving with my Canadian driver's license meant I had a world of explaining to do. If that wasn't enough, and to make matters worse, I was still listed under deportation status by the US government. If the officer decided to run my ID, my kids would most certainly be taken, and I would be sent on an all-expense paid trip back to Canada. As I brought my vehicle to a stop, the new reality was that there was no getting around what was about to unfold. I was in big trouble and I knew it. In a desperate plea for mercy I prayed to the Lord, asking Him to blind the eyes of the officers from seeing my kids.

Before you judge me, I remember as a kid reading a book entitled *God's Smuggler*. It was an amazing story of a missionary smuggling Bibles behind Soviet enemy lines for the sake of getting the gospel into the hands of new believers. The missionary would ask God to blind the eyes of the communist guards so that they wouldn't recognize the Bibles he was smuggling across. Every time the missionary prayed, God answered the prayer. The fact that God would do exactly as the missionary prayed had astounded me as a child. So as my vehicle came to a rolling stop, I felt that this was the only thing I could pray. I know. The Oklahoma Highway Patrol

weren't communists and I definitely wasn't smuggling Bibles to Christians. However, I was desperate and in need of a lot of mercy.

With one hand on his weapon the officer approached my vehicle from the passenger side and peered into the back window. As I began rolling the passenger window down, the officer cupped his hands against the glass to get a better look inside. At that point either the Lord heard my cries or I was about to face a very stiff penalty. Slowly the officer put his hands to his side and approached the passenger window.

"Good day, sir!" I said with a smile. With the deepest of Southern accents, he touched the bill of his cowboy-style hat as to "tip" a hello.

"You're going mighty fast, young man," he said, looking deep into my eyes.

"Yes, sir, I was," I replied. "I had been driving the whole trip at seventy, but when I saw the open stretch, I figured I could give it a little more juice," I added with a half grin. I've always believed that if you're willing to acknowledge your wrongdoing, then there's a good chance you'll discover mercy.

"Well, I clocked you at ninety-three," he interrupted. "So I'm going to need to see your license and insurance." As I reached toward my glove box to grab my insurance card I wondered, had the Lord really blinded his eyes? Up to this point the officer mentioned nothing about my kids not being in seat belts. Feeling a sudden burst of confidence, I realized that I might have made it through half the battle. Now I had to face the other half. Running my name and insurance was the clincher. I quickly handed him both. To my surprise the moment the officer saw my license, he began to laugh.

"What is this?" he asked, laughing, looking at my Canadian license.

I quickly did my best to explain how I had recently moved from Canada to Texas and how I was in the process of getting things changed over. Oddly enough, the more he looked at it, the more he laughed.

"How do you say this place?" he asked in reference to the name of my city and province.

“Saskatoon, Saskatchewan,” I replied.

“How do you say your name?” was the next question.

“Shian Klassen. It sounds like Cheyenne Wyoming but just spelled differently,” I said with a smile.

What happened next was unbelievable. The officer had me repeat both my name and birthplace three more times and then he tried to say it with me. With his strong accent and inability to pronounce my seemingly foreign language, I couldn’t help but laugh.

Standing outside my passenger window, the officer radioed to speak to his sergeant. When the sergeant responded the officer told him the story and then attempted to relay my name, city, and province from where I was originally from. When the sergeant began laughing, the patrol officer started laughing so hard he was bending over to get air. Then I was laughing. The officer then took a step back from my vehicle, and quietly finished his conversation with the sergeant. Miraculously, the officer then tipped his hat towards me, instructed me to drive the limit, returned my license and registration, and wished me a good day.

I was never so relieved and happy as I was that day. Not only was there no ticket for speeding, but there was no background check run on my name, and as I prayed, the officer never caught sight of the kids. Not only did God show mercy toward my stupidity, I truly believe that He also honored my smuggler’s prayer. Because of God’s mercy, a crazy Canadian license, and one very gracious officer, I was able to walk away from a huge mistake I had made.

Deuteronomy 7:9 (NKJV): “Therefore know that the Lord your God, He *is* God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and mercy for a thousand generations with those who love Him and keep His commandments...”

God’s mercy comes in the form of kindness when we don’t deserve it. Sometimes in life we lose sight of the big picture and end up derailed with the less important things, the selfish pleasures that life can bring. Most often we don’t care to stop ourselves, thinking

we're doing okay, until we get "pulled over" by something greater. By that time it's usually too late to try to correct the mistake. We earned the penalty we have coming, but it's also the moment in which God's mercy, grace, and kindness are at our disposal.

Just because you mess up doesn't mean you give up. The moment you mess up is the moment you run to God, not from Him. We need His mercy and we need His kindness. With it we can see beyond our present faults and failures. Without it we tend to only see our failure, defeat, and a chance to throw in the towel. That's why you cannot afford to give up.

Never give up.

NATZWEILER-STRUTHOF

Littering the path before us were several wooden buildings filled with the most hideous devices used for torture. The longer I stayed, the heavier my heart became.

It was the first time I had ever been to London. I was faced with a long layover at Heathrow Airport, which had given me time to myself. With my connector to Stuttgart, Germany, not leaving for another six hours, I took the opportunity to walk the shops and peruse the airport. I was surprised to see so many miniature cameras and microphones hanging from the ceiling, as well as the number of security personnel watching and following every move I made. Ignoring the feelings of Big Brother over my shoulder, I chose to set my focus on the excitement of this trip. I had been asked by a young pastor to come and speak to his small church community in the Black Forests of Bodelshausen, Germany. Along with this tremendous opportunity was the chance to see my ancestral roots. I was heading to a neck of the woods where the Klassen name had a deep heritage.

After landing in Stuttgart, I was greeted by the young pastor who graciously retrieved my bags and briefcase. As we journeyed the winding roads the sun began to set on the massive tree line surrounding the village where he lived. It was just like the pictures you would find in a textbook of old-style Germany. Littered alongside the road were Bavarian-style homes with the classic two-story A-frame roofs, complete with wooden shutters and streets made of cobblestone. For a moment I felt as though I was ushered back in time. With a somewhat busy week ahead he took me to the local McDonalds for a coffee and dropped me off at the bed and breakfast so that I could get a good night's sleep.

The following days were a full schedule of meeting, eating and getting the chance to speak to the pastor's leaders and congregation. However, as quickly as the week began did it come to an end. In just five days, what struck me the most was how at home I had begun to feel with them. The more I was with them, the more fondly I grew of the German people. It was as though we shared many of the same characteristics, both good and bad, especially when it came to food. As a treat to me, the young pastor was gracious enough to allow me to choose a couple of things that I wanted to do before I left Germany. With a love for all things sweet, I wanted authentic Black Forest cake. Then to satisfy my curiosity, I wanted to visit a concentration camp.

The next morning, we left early to meet the owner of a small bakery. He was delighted to serve us both a hearty slice of his Black Forest cake. Anticipating my first bite, my mind went back to my childhood days when my mom would bake this cake for me. I loved the taste of chocolate and cherries, so the thought of having authentic Black Forest cake in the heart of Germany was a dream come true. Sadly after my first mouthful I realized not all Black Forest cakes were created equal. Bathed in the authentic version was an ingredient my mom left out: brandy. From the cherries to the whip and everything in between, the cake was soaked in alcohol. My first bite quickly became my last. Graciously I requested that we visit a nearby café to absorb the bitterness. The look on my face at that point had given me away.

Not wasting any time, we headed back to the car to continue our adventure into France. We eventually crossed over the Rhine River, which separated us from Germany, whereby we took a minute to stop and snap a few photos. The anticipation and excitement for me was high as from there I could see the mountainous regions of Strasbourg.

The next hour was complete with heavy braking, heavy accelerating and a lot of swaying back and forth as we conquered the treacherous road up the mountain. Our persistence paid off when at last we could see the entrance to the parking area. No sooner did

we park did I eagerly bound out of the vehicle to check out my surroundings. The view from where we stood was spectacular. Unfortunately the view was the only thing spectacular about the place.

As we walked toward the gate, it was apparent that the French government had done a remarkable job of leaving most of the camp intact since it appeared as though it was operational. The haunting feeling that came over me was magnified as we entered the main gate. Looking down the mountainside, we gazed at the empty buildings and graveyard. The two of us, along with a handful of others, stood in complete silence when the decades-old, lingering residue of burned flesh filled our nostrils. Littering the path before us were several wooden buildings filled with the most hideous devices used for torture. The longer I stayed, the heavier my heart became.

Listed inside each of the wooden buildings was a write up, detailing the purpose of the camp and the purpose of the rooms. The purpose of the camp was to “break the spirit” of its prisoners by using various means of torture. When the prisoners were brought in, they would be forced to cultivate the field in harsh weather conditions, using the most primitive of tools. Once the prisoners collapsed from exhaustion or sickness, they would be assigned to one of the torture rooms to test the prisoners will to fight and will to live.

Trying to make sense of it all, and grasping some sort of understanding, proved futile. By the time the original camp had shut down, the French estimated over 20,000 men, women and children had been executed within the four years of its operation. My eyes welled up with tears as I sorted through my emotions. It was mind-boggling that such an ungodly regime was able to get away with so much for so long. My host and I soon drove away in silence, both impacted and changed.

Luke 12:4 (NKJV): “And I say to you, My friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do.”

It's so sad to think of the twenty thousand people who died never seeing their dreams come to fulfillment. The realization in knowing you are never going to raise a family, and never have a hope of tomorrow, is unthinkable.

People like the Nazi's used their power to kill and brutally torture millions of innocent lives. Yet, with all that power, they were never entirely successful at breaking the spirit of their prisoners. History has on record, thousands of heroes who refused to bow their knee to tyranny, even when it meant death.

Never let anyone break your spirit. No one should ever be given that much power over you. God is the One responsible for giving us our identity and with His help we will become the person we were created to be. He always finishes what He starts. That my friend, is why you cannot afford to give up.

Never give up.

THE CHRISTMAS MIRACLE

Frustrated I got up from my chair and made my way to the back doors.

As I approached the doors I could see through the glass the face of a former parishioner.

I sat alone in the cool, dark hallway that led to my office. It was the Friday before Christmas and I let everyone off work early. With our school dismissed at noon and offices closed at 2:00 p.m., it left me one hour to get the church's mortgage payment into the bank before the close of their business day. It was a quiet hour left to myself to figure out exactly how I was going to come up with the payment.

Two of the toughest financial times for our church was summer and Christmas. To prepare for the shortfall, twice a year I would have the church communicate their financial monthly commitment for the following six months so that we could budget accordingly. However, without fail, once summer rolled around many commitments waned. Then once Christmas arrived financial commitments were overshadowed with the added expense the holidays brought. To make this day worse, offices were now closed, which meant chances of money arriving within the next sixty minutes were out of the question. With no room to budge and no favors left with the bank, I needed a miracle.

I had done my best to inform everyone in church of our financial need for the past three weeks leading up to this day. Giving was something I respected and appreciated in people. I refused to use coercion or gimmicks of manipulation to twist people into giving. I believed that it was important, however, to keep people aware of how much we needed in order to make budget. After I did that, I spent a lot of time praying and trusting God to intervene and make up any shortfall if necessary. Never failing, the past eight years

proved God's faithfulness in that the needed money would always arrive on time! The difference with this particular year was that I had already been juggling a lot of things and I felt like I didn't give enough time to focus on this need. I was faced with feeling like I should have somehow done more. However, it was too late to think that now. Ten more minutes passed, and I was out of options. There was no back-up plan. I sat in silence and took a deep breath. I was getting grumpy.

The time was now 2:20 p.m. If I had the money in my personal account, I would have paid the mortgage myself. All I needed was a plan of action to communicate to the bank or I needed a lot of money. Unfortunately, I had neither. The more time that passed the more anxiety I began to feel. The more anxiety I felt the more I began feeling sorry for myself. Then while in the midst of my sulking, someone started banging on the office doors. Our office doors were constructed of heavy-duty steel and were located at the back of the church building. Most often, when one of our staff forgot their keys to the building, they would look for whoever was parked around back and then proceed to bang as hard as they could on the steel doors. As the banging began, I was in no mood to open the door and accommodate anyone. I wanted to sulk and be left alone, so I waited for them to leave. However, the banging on the door persisted. Frustrated I got up from my chair and made my way to the back doors. As I approached the doors I could see through the glass the face of a former parishioner.

Of all people needing something, it was James. James, the older gentleman who used to attend would, without fail, talk to me at the close of every service. I loved the guy and got to know him well for several years. However, one Sunday morning he informed me that he was leaving the church. He had apparently found another church that he liked better. That morning he then shook my hand, thanked me for being his pastor, and walked out of the sanctuary. While I appreciated him having the guts to come and tell me he was leaving, I was left with feeling somewhat used. It had been almost a year since that Sunday and now here he was.

Seeing James standing at the door didn't spark feelings of happiness whatsoever. I had no idea what the man wanted, but I knew one thing: if he wanted to talk over a coffee, I was unavailable. The offices were closed, and I needed to go home soon. Working hard to kick my bad attitude and be cordial, I pushed the door open wide enough to peek my head out.

"Hey, James! Offices are closed," I said grimly.

"Hi, Pastor!" James responded in his trademark smile. "I was passing by and the Lord told me to write you a check. I was going to wait, but I saw your car in the lot and so I figured I should give it to you now."

James then handed me his check, folded. Upon thanking him, he shook my hand, turned and walked back to his car. As I shut the door, I stuffed the check into my pocket and went back to my chair in the dark hallway. While I appreciated his heart and willingness to give, I also knew that James had long retired from his job. With him no longer attending the church I couldn't imagine him giving more than twenty dollars. Struggling to keep my attitude right, I did my best to focus on the positive. Of all people, I could always count on James to give something. Twenty dollars wasn't going to change anything, but it reminded me that God still cared.

The time was 2:30 p.m. I had thirty minutes left to make it to the bank. I figured that since I had sat this long, waiting, that I would go ahead and sit until 3:00 p.m. There wasn't anything at this point I could do, so instead I started thinking about James. He seemed nervous to see me. I imagined that he felt bad for leaving and then having to face me again. Then I wondered if everything was okay in his life and family. Did James come for prayer, but I was too consumed with my problems to notice? Then I began feeling bad. As I sat and pondered everything regarding James, a light switch went on inside my head. What if I was wrong on all counts and James was excited to hand me money? Assuming that couldn't be the reason, I reached into my pocket to unfold his check.

At first glance I noticed the check wasn't payable to me, like I assumed. It was made payable to the church. As my eyes fell on the

amount, I sat there stunned. It wasn't anywhere close to the twenty dollars I had imagined. No, instead it was for the exact amount needed to cover the mortgage payment! I was speechless and blown away. How did James know? The entire time I had been sulking and feeling defeated, God had prepared James in advance to meet the need. Making an altar out of the chair I had been sitting in, I fell on my knees and asked for God's forgiveness of my rotten attitude. Then as fast as I could, I raced to the bank, depositing the mortgage payment with only minutes left to spare. It was the best Christmas miracle I could have received.

Hab 3:17-19 (MSG): Though the cherry trees don't blossom and the strawberries don't ripen, Though the apples are worm-eaten and the wheat fields stunted, Though the sheep pens are sheepless and the cattle barns empty, 18 I'm singing joyful praise to God . I'm turning cartwheels of joy to my Savior God. 19 Counting on God 's Rule to prevail, I take heart and gain strength. I run like a deer. I feel like I'm king of the mountain!

When there are no 'outs' and nothing left to your name, take heart. I know, when all is lost it makes perfect sense to give up, but don't! Why? Because something miraculous happens when we are left with nothing and we refuse to give up. That's why the prophet took heart, gained strength and got wildly excited in the face of defeat. He knew that he could count on God's 'rule' to prevail. In other words, he knew that God was about to do something miraculously creative.

It's His rule that creates something when there is nothing, because that's just who God is. He loves to turn darkness to light, give sight to the blind and deliver those who have been held captive. So, as weird as it might seem, take heart and don't give up. 'Nothing' is the invitation God needs to dramatically alter our situation. He wants us free and will use our nothing to create something wonderfully impossible in order to achieve that end.

That's why when all hope seems lost, hang in there! Your 'king of the mountain' experience is on its way! That's why you cannot afford to give up.

Never give up.

TAKING THE PLUNGE

Faster than I could snap my fingers and quicker than I could utter a cry for help, my feet had slipped out from underneath, sending me falling backward into the icy rapids. I was in big trouble.

I was looking forward to some down time with the family and taking a break from the hectic schedule of ministry life. I booked us a four-day trip to Estes Park, Colorado, where we could stay in a comfortable condominium in the heart of the Rocky Mountains. Only twenty-five feet in front of our condo flowed the Colorado Creek in all its glory. The spring runoff was in full effect, which meant the “creek” waters were shy of a raging river. It made for some great pictures as the icy rapids thundered through, nearly overflowing its banks. To add to the beautiful scenery, we were met by a half dozen towering neighborhood elk wanting to get a better look at us. Beautiful and somewhat majestic, they sauntered alongside the road, oblivious to us and anyone around them. Seeing them helped me relax and take in a deep breath of the crisp mountain air. Glancing off toward the mountains, I mused at the possibility of us never returning home.

No camping experience is ever complete without having a barbecue, so I made sure I came prepared. The kids grabbed the football and scoped out their playing field while I fired up the grill. The big item for tonight’s meal was ribeye steaks. Being on vacation was a celebration, and a celebration in our household usually involved charbroiled steak. With the grill heating up and dinner plans underway, I hurried over to where the kids were to get in on the action. Or so I thought.

Throwing the football with my kids was always fun. This time around, it was all about seeing how deep they could throw the ball, so I took my position far left of the creek bed. Dillon lobbed a short

throw over to Cassie, who in turn caught the ball with ease. She took a few steps backward, indicating the potential Hail Mary heading my way. Within seconds of the football releasing from her hand, instead of it traveling in my direction, the ball forcefully bounced its way over the grassy knoll and into the icy rapids of the creek bed.

In dismay the three of us watched as the raging waters took hold of our football, sending it downstream. Since losing a football was viewed as somewhat of a tragedy in our family, we three peered over the edge to say our good-byes to our beloved ball. To our surprise the rigorous waves had pushed the ball aside and lodged it deep within the crevice of a large rock. Elated, I wasted no time in risking it all to save our five-dollar pigskin.

Cautiously I meandered my way down the embankment until my feet reached a plateau. I steadied my feet using the surrounding rocks while gripping the rooted weeds for leverage. Having the ball within arm's reach, I let go of the weeds and leaned forward to perform my final rescue. Faster than I could snap my fingers and quicker than I could cry for help, my feet slipped out from underneath me, sending me falling backward into the icy rapids. I was in big trouble.

The sudden motion of falling backward reflexively caused me to gasp for air, proving beneficial as I was pulled below the raging stream. The frigid waters beat over my body as I bounced carelessly against the rocks beneath me. Helplessly I felt as though the waters were in control of my destination, forcing me to go with the current. It was as though someone had jammed a thousand needles into my back as my body slammed from boulder to boulder. I was desperate to find my way out of this and fast.

Submerged under several feet of thirty-degree rushing waters is enough to cause the human body to go into shock. Remembering my training from my slew of canoe trips, I used the force from the pounding rapids to propel my body toward the embankment. Managing to get my head above the whirlpool of eddies, I took a quick breath and reached out for the passing weeds. Thankfully they provided enough leverage to pull myself up to where I could safely

climb up an adjacent rock. Bruised, exhausted, and in pain, I looked up to see my son reaching down to help me out of my near-tragic mishap. It was a mishap way too close for comfort.

2 Kings 6:4–6 (*The Message*): “He went with them. They came to the Jordan and started chopping down trees. As one of them was felling a timber, his axhead flew off and sank in the river. ‘Oh no, master!’ he cried out. ‘And it was borrowed!’ The Holy Man said, ‘Where did it sink?’ The man showed him the place. He cut off a branch and tossed it at the spot. The axhead floated up.”

I wished Elisha was around when our football fell in. He would have saved me a lot of trauma at the time. I admit, risking my life for a five-dollar ball was one of my least-brilliant ideas. The fact is, as with the man with the axe-head, mistakes happen. When you find yourself in this type of predicament, how do you handle it? Interestingly the man with the axe-head chose to cry out for help. When he did, his biggest problem turned into his biggest miracle.

Never allow a mistake to be the end of your story. Something miraculous happens when we don't give up. Miracles don't happen when we complain, beg, or shift the blame for our problems. Miracles don't happen when we stay below our icy river, feeling sorry for ourselves. They happen when we find a way out. Miracles happen when we don't give up. That's why you cannot afford to give up.

Never give up.

SAYING GOOD-BYE TO THE CHURCH I LOVED

Why on earth would my friend tell me this? I wondered if a few of the former parishioners had somehow gotten to him by trying to influence my demise.

Struggling to find the words to pray, I drove silently on my four-hour trek south to minister for a family member over the upcoming weekend. Driving alone, I endeavored to spend the entire trip in prayer because I needed answers. It was year nine as senior pastor of my church in Texas. Just one year earlier we had the best year the church had ever experienced, on all levels. Finances were finally in the black. The Christian school was growing. We opened a day care, purchased additional property, and bought a fully furnished charter bus. Best of all, new faces were showing up every Sunday. But that was one year ago.

It was Friday afternoon in mid-October, the year everything had changed. Over the past few months people began leaving faster than new people were coming in. Giving was down to only a fraction of what it was just a year earlier, which was less than what it had ever been. The day care, the school, and staff morale were struggling on all fronts. Creditors had begun calling and writing us letters. Bewildered I began praying as I drove because nothing was making sense to me. I felt as though I was running an entirely different church. I could count on the committed, but their number kept shrinking. I had been down this road more than once, but I couldn't help shaking the fact that things seemed so different. I needed answers.

As I drove the lonely highway south, I began rehearsing my past twenty-plus years of being in ministry. Why was this so different? I rehearsed every victory that the Lord brought us through. I did my

best to remember every word of encouragement I had ever been given. As I crossed into the beginning of the second hour of travel, I found myself begging God for insight. I prayed earnestly. I shed tears and poured my heart out. I promised to change whatever needed changing. I even tried shutting up for the last hour of the trip, figuring that God wondered why I talked so much. It was futile. No response from heaven, no angelic visitations (not that I expected one), and no divine impartations. Nothing but myself and the Texas highway I was on. Ahead I could see the lights of a familiar fast-food joint calling my name. I eased off the highway and pulled into the drive-thru as I waited for them to take my order.

“So much for spending my whole trip in prayer,” I said, sulking.

I was hungry and frustrated. I had given the Lord a perfect opportunity to talk to me and it seemed as though He wasn't seizing it. It made me wonder if God thought I was doing fine with this church dilemma, or if He even cared. I had spent the last three hours praying for answers, and had none. For whatever reason, God had chosen silence, or at least I thought so.

Following the weekend and with the arrival of my workweek that Monday morning, I pulled my car into the usual parking spot at my church. I considered it strange to see a large rental truck idling near the end of the parking lot. The preacher friend I had asked to cover my weekend church services while I was away was supposed to have left the night before en route to California, to begin his new church. I assumed that this was his vehicle and that for whatever reason, he had chosen not to leave. Curious as to what was going on, I entered my building. There stood my preacher friend with a big smile on his face, waiting to see me. We shook hands and hugged, then before I could get a word in edgewise he asked me to step outside.

As we walked out into the sun of a bright Texas morning, he motioned for me to walk toward where he had parked his rental. Still wondering what was transpiring, my friend began to explain the reason for not leaving the night before. Apparently he couldn't leave until he obeyed God and delivered a message to me. He began to

explain that the purpose of him wanting to tell me this outside was so that he could leave right away, in the event I became angry with him. I started laughing at his sense of humor, but as I laughed I quickly realized he wasn't joking. He looked nervous and distraught. Changing my disposition to that of being more serious, I took a deep breath and asked for this "message."

His words, though short and to the point, hit me like a ton of bricks. He told me that God had informed him that there wasn't going to be any victory win for me regarding the battles the church was facing. In so many words my friend explained that the battle the church was facing required a new leader and that it was time for me to step aside. God was going to elect someone else to lead the charge, and in so doing the Lord would lead me into the very thing He had prepared for me all along.

I stood there on the sidewalk feeling stunned, shocked, and perplexed. I waved my friend on as he exited the parking lot to begin his journey west. My pastor friend was right. My first reaction was to be mad at him. Why on earth would my friend tell me this? I wondered if a few of the former parishioners had somehow gotten to him by trying to influence my demise. I wondered why God would give my friend the right to speak on His behalf since I had spent all weekend praying. I walked back into my office and slumped down in my chair. I was caught between feeling an insurmountable load of stress and a feeling of peace, followed by a flood of tears. As hard as it was to admit, I knew that my pastor friend had no knowledge of what I was facing. Nobody put him up to it and he was only a messenger. As tough as it was that day, it marked the beginning of the end for me in Borger, Texas.

Over the next eight months, as painful as it was, God walked me through the entire process of releasing the church. By the time the church had reached its final month, it was in desperate need of financial help and new direction. Regardless of how hard I fought and tried to fix things, the words of my preacher-friend-turned-prophet had held true. I couldn't and wouldn't be the one to lead the people I loved into another victory. My only victory would be in

knowing I was promised a new tomorrow. It was a promise that kept my heart steady and my perspective clear through the roughest of waters. Almost ten years to the day, my family and I drove out of the very city we once considered home. God was calling us to the place He had been preparing us for, a city where I had never been, to do a work I had never done.

Psalm 89:21–24 (NCV): “I will steady him with my hand and strengthen him with my arm. No enemy will make him give forced payments, and wicked people will not defeat him. I will crush his enemies in front of him; I will defeat those who hate him. My loyalty and love will be with him. Through me he will be strong.”

If there's one truth I discovered over the years, it's the fact that change never comes in the form you thought it would. Let's face it. Whether we like it or not, seasons change. Even the prettiest of leaves change color, wither, and eventually die. Never giving up means that you find a way to keep moving forward no matter how often the seasons change.

If you find that your season is ending, and are unsure of your tomorrow, then hold on to this one truth. God never brings you from something to nothing. That is why it's important for us to keep moving forward. Always be moving forward. That's why you cannot afford to give up.

Never give up.

WOULD I DO IT FOR JUST TWO PEOPLE?

Yet if I didn't know better, the shape of the clouds forming on the horizon appeared to be more than just the "likelihood" of a heavy storm. I was thinking that it looked more along the lines of a pending monstrosity of a storm. The last thing I needed this weekend was snow.

As my seven-month-long sabbatical from preaching neared its end, anticipation was at an all-time high in opening our brand-new church. In the weeks leading up to opening day, I was writing weekly blogs, visiting pastors, meeting business owners, and going for coffee with everyone and anyone who would accept. I had felt that it was important to meet as many new people as possible, to learn the culture and the needs of this new community I was about to pastor.

My dream was to use as much money possible in order to launch this new church as big as possible. To my surprise, not everyone was excited about starting a new church in the Pacific Northwest as much as I was. Within the first few months of arriving in Portland, rumors began to surface as to why I had left Texas. Some were convinced that I had embezzled church funds from my former pastorate. Others thought I had left because of an affair. Then, several of my friends in ministry went so far as to call me a heretic and a drunk. In a matter of weeks, I watched many of my relationships and financial commitments to help us get this church started, dissolve.

I had never anticipated so much push back on all fronts. I struggled with wondering how we could launch this church without any financial backing, as I fought back feelings of disappointment, rejection and isolation on many levels. Relying on some solid advice

from my closest friend, I came to the realization that if this church was going to get started, it would have to be started organically.

With no promise of a monthly income to cover a lease, I switched my sights to renting a conference room from the local hotels. Unfortunately they refused to commit to our church renting from them on a weekly basis. Needing something with more of a guarantee, I cast my sights upon local restaurants. Located in the central part of Hillsboro, was a well-known bar and grill. To my surprise they also had a small banquet room that held fifty people. Less than five days later, the owners agreed to lend us their banquet room every Sunday, at no charge. Things were finally coming together.

With only two weeks left to launch, I appropriated every dollar the church had into advertising. I had enough funds to create some sandwich board signs, print a few posters and create a mailer to reach almost 10,000 homes. I had also received permission from the owner that if more than fifty showed up he would let us host church from his small stage located in the bar. This was beyond anything I could have asked for. The closer we got to launching the church, the more excited I had become.

With two days to launch, I was advised by a friend to check the weather. It was early February in Oregon and that afternoon the sky was looking mysteriously ominous. The weather service predicted a drop in the temperature overnight, and if everything correlated just right the likelihood of a heavy snowstorm was imminent. Yet if I didn't know better, the shape of the clouds forming on the horizon appeared to be more than just the "likelihood" of a heavy storm. I was thinking that it looked more along the lines of a pending monstrosity of a storm. The last thing I needed this weekend was snow.

By 2:00 p.m. that afternoon, it began to snow. The snow fell so quickly and so heavily that shortly thereafter, school kids were being let out early. Four hours later, almost two inches had fallen. News came that the city of Portland had begun shutting down the highways

as car owners began abandoning their vehicles by the groves. As pretty as the scenery out my front door was, I was getting nervous.

I awoke early Saturday morning to find that another three inches had fallen. With last-minute things to do, getting out of the house and driving the roads were becoming next to impossible. Portland and our cities to the west had all shut down their major roadways, encouraging everyone to stay home. By late afternoon that day, another two inches had fallen, leaving a total of seven inches of the powder. With hopes of the weather improving, that evening as the temperatures warmed it brought with it freezing rain. Driving would now be treacherous and the hopes of launching church the next evening were diminishing. Unless a good majority of the snow melted, I couldn't foresee anyone wanting to brave the outdoors.

As Sunday morning came, I took my car out for a drive and barely made it down my street. The main roads had not yet been cleared. I shook my head in disbelief. I prayed, hummed and hawed, and began feeling the weight of disappointment setting in. There was no way I could expect Oregonians to get out and risk their lives. At this point I didn't even know whether the bar and grill would be open. I was regretting the fact that I had spent thousands on advertising. Reluctantly I took a deep breath and dialed the number to the restaurant. With only a cook and bartender present, the bartender answered the call. To my surprise she seemed exceptionally cheerful. Hearing the tone of my voice and anticipating where our conversation was going, the bartender said something to me that I'll never forget.

"So tell me," she said in a very matter-of-fact way. "What if two older ladies happened to come wandering in wanting to attend your new church? Should I tell them the pastor decided to cancel because he didn't want to drive here? Would it not be worth having church here tonight if just two people decide to come?"

I was speechless. Could God have inspired a bartender to remind me to not give up? I hadn't anticipated that kind of answer from a bartender, but she was right. I told her to let the owner know that we

would be arriving within a few hours and that our first church service was going to happen as planned.

By midafternoon, with the ice having melted along with a portion of the snow, we packed our gear and headed for the restaurant to set up. Once we arrived, I closed my eyes at the sight of the empty, snow-filled parking lot. To make matters worse, even the restaurant was empty. Thankfully with family and friends attending there would at least be a few bodies that I could preach to. However, with fifteen minutes left to launch, there was still not a visitor in sight.

I stared out the front doors with somewhat of a bleak disposition. Everyone was doing their best to encourage me, but it wasn't helping much. I felt about as organic as one could get. I felt bad for my family and friends who flew or drove so far to be here for our church launch. Why the heck did it have to snow now? I wondered. It had been ten years since Oregon had seen snow of this magnitude. The more I thought about it, the more I focused on it. The more I focused on it, the more sorry I had felt for us. I knew that I needed to change gears and my attitude.

As I took a step back from the doors, my eye caught two people bundled up in heavy winter coats, walking up the sidewalk toward the restaurant. Could they be coming to our church? Quickly I pushed the door of the restaurant open for them to walk in. To my surprise, before me stood two little old ladies smiling and excited, inquiring as to where the church service was.

2 Corinthians 4:18 (NCV): “We set our eyes not on what we see but on what we cannot see. What we see will last only a short time, but what we cannot see will last forever.”

When the night was over, I realized how caught up I had been in numbers. I was thinking about church for the masses, while the Lord was interested in having a church willing to reach two people. I contemplated giving up all because the outcome didn't look like what I imagined. I imagined success to be a room full of people on

opening night, but God sees success differently. He sees success in never giving up on what He's instructed us to do. That's why we can't set our eyes on what is going on around us today. We set our eyes on the promise of our tomorrow. We look ahead, knowing that our best days, our most blessed days, have yet to unfold. Always set your heart on the long-term goal. That my friend, is why you cannot afford to give up.

Never give up.

LET HER GO

***There was no way I heard what I heard.
Troubled and upset, I got up from the ground and began
my walk home.***

Our move to the Pacific Northwest was a journey that required an enormous amount of faith, hope, and trust in God. Since the church wasn't officially launching for another eight months, it gave me a lot more time to be with my family and plenty of time to start developing the structure as to how this new church was going to develop. What I didn't see coming was the growing change of heart that had been developing with my wife.

In the midst of our adjustments to the Northwest, our home and family life were rapidly adjusting as well. Our daughter was in her senior year of high school and our son had begun working in downtown Portland for a web-design company. My in-laws, who disagreed with our move, had become more and more estranged toward us. Yet nothing concerned me more than the animosity which was quickly developing in my wife, towards me. What used to be petty disagreements between us were forming into all-out battles. It was as though nothing I said or did was enough to satisfy her growing unrest. She was unhappy with our new lives, our rental home and me. I tried my best to walk her back through each prayerful step we took in getting to Portland. Regardless of how much she acknowledged it, it seemed as though she didn't believe it, or for some reason it still wasn't enough. I did my best to encourage her that it would all work out. Or at least I thought it would.

Three months after the launching of the church, as my morning routine was, I walked and prayed in a forested area not far from our home. As I reached the end of the forest, I heard God's voice say, "Let her go."

For the next five minutes I sat below a tree utterly speechless and confused. I knew exactly whom God was referring to in letting go, but this was preposterous. I knew and preached for years that He is the God who hates divorce and everything about it. Besides that, I didn't believe that either of us ever considered divorce. There was no way I heard what I heard. Troubled and upset, I got up from the ground and began my walk home. As I did, a text came through my phone, from a faraway friend.

It read, "The words you heard from the Lord are just and true."

I felt as though my entire foundation was crumbling before my eyes. I knew that the text was of no coincidence just as I knew the sound of God's voice was genuine. It just didn't make any sense to me. I wanted so badly to dismiss it all or to come up with an alternative plan, but I couldn't. For the next two days I held what I heard deep within my heart. However, by the end of that week I was going crazy. I had to find out. Nervous and unsure of the next step forward, I sat down that Friday night and began to explain to my wife what I "thought" I heard the Lord tell me. The bigger surprise came for me when across her countenance came a look of relief. She had taken me off guard since I hadn't imagined anything but denial on her part. Stunned, I asked her to speak. Unbeknownst to me, she had begged God to be released from our marriage. She shared with me how she had felt trapped for as long as she could remember. She felt trapped in pleasing people, trapped by her parents, trapped with being the wife of a pastor, and trapped within the church. The fact that we were in Portland on our own gave her the chance to see things for what they were. She wanted the chance to start life over, but this time on her own.

I didn't know any of this. Why didn't I know any of this? How over twenty-six years could I not know of this? Was I to fight to keep her and this foreign thinking? Would hours of counsel help her see things properly? Questions were flooding into my head as to what to do. Yet I couldn't help shaking the thought of how she believed she had been trapped. As I sat and listened, I felt neither anger nor

resentment toward her. Instead I felt sorrow. The longer we talked, the more it became apparent of what was to unfold.

It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that very few people would understand, much less agree with us. The fact that I was a pastor only made things worse. How would I explain this to the couples I endeavored to help over the years? How would I explain this to my new church? What about our kids? How would they possibly understand this when I myself could barely wrap my brain around it.

Over the next two months my wife waffled in her decision daily, deciding one day to stay, the next day to go. She wanted to stay because life with me was comfortable, but the thought of being trapped for the remainder of her life was more than she could fathom. Soon the stress of indecisiveness had gotten the best of me, and I ended up in the emergency room. Realizing that it was tearing me apart, my wife took it as her signal to go.

In less than three months from the day the Lord instructed me, my wife and I officially divorced and said our good-byes outside a hotel in Dallas, Texas. She was staying in Texas and I was flying back home to Oregon. As I boarded the shuttle bound for the airport, we waved our last good-bye. For the first time in twenty-six years, I was overcome with the feeling of being all alone.

1 Samuel 30:3–6 (NKJV): “So David and his men came to the city, and there it was, burned with fire; and their wives, their sons, and their daughters had been taken captive. Then David and the people who were with him lifted up their voices and wept, until they had no more power to weep. And David’s two wives, Ahinoam the Jezreelitess, and Abigail the widow of Nabal the Carmelite, had been taken captive. Now David was greatly distressed, for the people spoke of stoning him, because the soul of all the people was grieved, every man for his sons and his daughters. But David strengthened himself in the Lord his God.”

In the weeks to follow, I can't tell you how many times I sat in my empty home not sure of what to do. I encountered more pain than I had ever experienced. I went through a process of blaming myself for all of it. I judged myself harder than anyone and beat myself up for not seeing things sooner. Yet day by day and step by step, God began to rebuild my life from the broken pieces. At first I found it difficult to pray. Sunday after Sunday I wrestled with God to let me quit the ministry and reject His call upon my life. I tried hard to believe that I was a complete failure and tried to give up but it was as though the Lord wouldn't let me. Remarkably, it was as though everyone and anyone that loved me began making it their mission to not allow me to give up. Looking back, it's amazing to see how God's love in action provided me with the strength and encouragement to get back on my feet and set my sights on a better tomorrow. It changed my life forever.

What should have been a day of victory for David ended up in horrific loss. Those once loyal to him were ready to see him killed. Words cannot express the kind of pain and agony that David faced. Was God judging David for something he wasn't aware of? Did God even care? Emotionally traumatized, he did what he knew to do: encourage himself.

Sometimes in life it may look as though we've lost everything. If David had given up that day because of the loss he appeared to have suffered, he would have truly lost everything, including his own life. But David didn't give up. With a little self-encouragement, David got back on his feet and went on to do something great for the Lord. That's why no matter how much you've lost, how alone you feel, or how desolate things appear, you can't give up. That's why you cannot afford to give up.

Never give up.

THE BEST COOKIE YOU'LL EVER EAT

In my fit of rage my lungs began to tighten. My heart was beating wildly, and my hands had begun to shake. It felt as though everything in my life was going wrong.

Shortly after getting my own apartment, it was apparent that with the changes that had transpired in my life that I needed a full-time job. With high recommendation from my neighbor and good friend, I was hired by the leading cable company as a direct sales representative, selling products door to door. Door to door sales wasn't exactly my cup of tea, but it gave me the opportunity to meet new people and allow the church the time it needed to grow financially without the burden of having to support me.

Within months of working my new job, I awoke one Saturday morning to the sound of my work phone ringing with a call from an incredibly distraught elderly customer. As I patiently listened, he explained how his cable services were not working because the buttons didn't respond. Realizing that the "buttons" referred to his remote control, I encouraged him to change the batteries. Needless to say, he had already tried that option. I attempted to walk him through the process of pairing the remote to his television, but unfortunately it seemed all too much for him. What he wanted was for me to come over. I let him know that I would be back at work on Monday, but my answer wasn't good enough. Instead the elderly man began sobbing over the phone, and of course I began feeling sorry for him. With a ten-mile drive ahead, I got dressed, grabbed a new remote from the trunk of my car, and headed out on the road. Besides, I needed to run to Target.

When I arrived at his home, I parked my car on the street and headed up to his door. No sooner did I get to the bottom of the stairs did the front door swing wide open. Stepping outside, with the biggest smile I've seen in years, was a white-haired elderly man

elated to have me come to his home. As I reached the top of the stairs, and before I could get a word in edgewise, from behind his back he presented me with a freshly baked chocolate chip cookie.

“Thank you so much for coming! I baked this cookie for you!” he exclaimed. “I promise you this is the best cookie you’ll ever eat!”

I chuckled while sarcastically repeating back to him his “best cookie you’ll ever eat” line as though I had never eaten a chocolate chip cookie before. I let him know how much I appreciated the gesture as I attempted to hand him his new remote. Instead he insisted I take the cookie.

“You have to eat my cookie!” he said, smiling. “I know this is the best cookie you’ll ever eat.”

Smiling back, and taking the cookie in hand, I let him know how much I appreciated his little gift and in return attempted to hand him his new remote. To my surprise he wouldn’t take the remote. Instead he begged me to come into the house and set it up for him. What was I to say? Since the elderly gentleman went through the hassle of baking me a cookie, the least I could do was program his new remote. Thus, I motioned for him to lead the way in. Upon entering his living room, I attempted to set the cookie down on his end table in order to free my hands so as to work on his remote. Apparently, that was a no-no. Standing close enough to my face so as to violate my zone of personal space, he simply stood there smiling, begging for me to try his cookie. Knowing that the bantering was never going to end, I took a bite of the cookie and then another, and then another until I had it finished.

The cookie was fresh and definitely gooey, but it still tasted like a million other freshly baked chocolate chip cookies I’ve had in my lifetime. Not willing to hurt his feelings, I let him know that the cookie was tremendous. He, of course, was delighted. He then led me to the television that needed pairing and then disappeared back into the kitchen. I successfully paired the remote within two minutes and called him back to the living room to see. To my surprise he didn’t reply. Again I called his name. I knew he was in the kitchen because

I could hear him mumbling to himself, but he gave me no response. Curiously I set the remote down and walked into his kitchen.

With his nose pressed against the oven window, he placed one hand on the oven door and the other on a small kitchen timer. It appeared he was timing each batch of cookies to perfection. As the timer rang, he yanked open the oven door, quickly pulling out the baking sheet. Oddly enough I was surprised to see the baking sheet having only five small cookies.

“Who bakes only five cookies?” I thought to myself.

Yet proudly and somewhat excited, the man looked at them and smiled. He asked, “Was that not the best cookie you’ve ever eaten?”

“Uh, yeah,” I responded, unenthused.

I was done talking about the cookie. Clearly at this point he was more interested in cookie making than he was in his broken remote. I shook his hand and thanked him for his hospitality as it was time for me to get on with my day and run some errands. It wasn’t until I jumped in my car did I realize that something was different.

I checked my phone app for the nearest Target. Thankfully there was one within a few miles. However, as I began my drive, I noticed my breathing had tightened. Having grown up with asthma, it was not uncommon for me during pollen season to sense a bit of tightening in my lungs. Yet this tightening seemed different. The farther away from the man’s house I drove, the tighter my lungs were getting. To make matters worse, my stomach didn’t feel so good. It was as though strange symptoms began escalating while my health began mysteriously deteriorating. Quickly I pulled the car over in time for me to run outside and vomit. How could I feel so ill so fast? Wondering if the old man’s house triggered a flu bug, I waited until the dry heaves passed and then jumped back in my car. I was too close to the store to give up, so after a few deep breaths I put the car back in gear and headed out of his neighborhood. This was my Saturday and I was going to make the most of it.

As I continued my short drive to Target, I couldn’t help but start laughing as I thought about this customer. Who makes such a big deal over half a dozen cookies? As I thought it over, it made me

happy to think of how I made his day. It made me even happier that it was Saturday and that I still had the entire day to get things done. Then I was overwhelmingly elated thinking about the fact that I could go shopping. By the time I turned down the street toward Target, I was no longer feeling sick and neither were my lungs tight. Maybe it really wasn't a flu bug after all, I thought. That made me happy, too, but unfortunately my happiness turned to concern as I looked up into my rearview mirror to see that I was being followed by a police officer. What did he want from me and where did he come from? Did he happen to see me sick on the side of the road? Was I speeding? Had he been watching my every move? Now I was getting nervous. Obviously the officer must have had a good reason to follow me. I felt panic and began to sweat. Arriving at the store, I quickly pulled into the parking lot and stopped my car. Thankfully the officer drove on.

By the time I walked into the store, I was doing better than I had been all day. I quickly made my way to the electronics section where I looked for the accessory I needed. Upon seeing the item, I realized that the prices appeared a lot higher than I had expected. I looked for possibly trying different options, but found none. If I was going to get what I needed I had to buy what was available. This was not acceptable. Enough was enough. I had not come all this way to buy some overpriced car accessory. There had to be a cheaper model. There had to be better options. Frustrated I stood staring at the lack of selection until I noticed out of the corner of my eye, someone staring at me. I returned the stare, wondering what his problem was. It was then that I realized my lips had not stopped moving. In fact my lips had been moving the entire time. Not only was I engaging in my own discussion, but I was also quite openly and vocally sharing all my frustrations with the entire store. I looked at the man, smiled, and then grabbed the overpriced item and headed to the checkout. Things were getting weird fast, and I needed to go home.

I sat in my car and wondered what my problem was. Quickly I unpacked my treasured purchase only to find I had purchased the wrong item. At this point my frustration culminated. How could I have

been so stupid? All that time wasted when I could have found what I had needed in an auto store. This was unacceptable! I shouted in my car, "What kind of store doesn't carry exactly what you need?" I couldn't believe it. Mad and upset I took my frustrations out on my steering wheel. I yelled at the top of my lungs at Target and punched my steering wheel until my hands hurt. "Unacceptable!" I shouted. Then I got scared.

In my fit of rage, my lungs began to tighten. My heart was beating wildly, and my hands had begun to shake. It felt as though everything in my life was going wrong. "What if I never find another car part I need?" I asked myself. "Why can't anything go right for me?" I wondered. I started feeling incredibly sad. I was sad that my life had instantly become one big mess. I was also scared. I was scared to drive home and too scared to finish my day. And then I felt cold.

At this point I realized that something was seriously wrong with me and that I needed help. I quickly texted Andria who happened to be in town, visiting Dillon and me for the weekend. I was surprised at her quick response.

"What did you eat?" was the first line of questioning from her.

Puzzled I wondered what she was getting at. Something was seriously wrong with me that had nothing to do with food. This had everything to do with my life. "Nothing except a cookie from a customer this morning," I responded.

"Was it a special cookie?" she texted, accompanied with smiling emojis.

Having never lived in the Northwest and being a good church kid all my life, I was unfamiliar with the term "special cookies." Shortly after her text, Andria called me. When I began to describe to her my symptoms, all she could do was laugh. She was kind enough to teach me the "rules" of never accepting anything edible from strangers in the Pacific Northwest. I learned a valuable lesson that day, a day I wished to never repeat again.

Proverbs 15:13 (NCV): “Happiness makes a person smile, but sadness can break a person’s spirit.”

What qualified my cookie as the “greatest cookie you’ll ever eat” by my elderly customer was the fact that the cookie was baked with cannabis butter. That morning I estimate that I ingested roughly ten times the recommended dosage found in smoking a joint. The good news was that I wasn’t losing my mind. The bad news was that my symptoms lasted for the next three days.

Sometimes the best remedy for life is to laugh. We all walk into unsuspecting moments. We all misunderstand, say or do something stupid, or end up being completely naïve about something we should have seen coming. It’s all part of being human. It’s times like these that make up the patchwork quilt that defines our lives.

Too much sadness eventually breaks our spirits—our hopes and dreams. It’s the gateway to giving up. Happiness and laughter, on the other hand, not only make you smile, they work like medicine on a broken spirit. That’s why it’s important to keep the medicine jar of laughter (as opposed to the cannabis jar) always handy. It will keep you from giving up. My friend, you cannot afford to give up.

Never give up.

THE DAY SHE CHANGED EVERYTHING

The more I fell in love with her, the more I wanted to be with her every day, for the rest of my life. So by the time the month's end drew near, I got the nerve to propose.

Everything was different. I moved from a spacious three-bedroom home into a small two-bedroom apartment. Since I no longer owned a car, my son was gracious enough to lend me his for several months until the time came when I could afford one. I no longer filled my days with studying, church work, and meeting people. Oh, I was meeting people, but instead I was selling them cable and Internet for an average of ten hours every day. By the time summer rolled around the following year, the church had suffered its first split, followed by a second, followed by the worship band walking out in pursuit of a better deal. My son and I were running the church alone, giving it as much time as we could around our work schedules. Dillon kept me company every weekend and Cassie's dog made sure to keep me occupied throughout the week since Cassie was still in Oklahoma attending Bible college. Yet, no matter how much I kept myself busy, there was a void, and I was lonely.

When I served as youth director in Canada, both the Bible college and the music school would see several students from North America come and spend at least two years of their lives studying. I would often utilize these students to help with certain youth events of mine, serving as chaperones. In the process I had the chance to know some great people. One of the key churches responsible for sending young people up to Canada happened to be the church I would one day pastor in West Texas. When I eventually took over that church, I was able to draw from some of the relationships I had already established while in Canada. One of those relationships was with a young woman by the name of Andria.

During my first two years in Texas, Andria remained in Canada to work with inner-city teenagers, many of them from troubled homes. When the inner-city church felt that Andria had become too familiar with certain gang members, they put Andria on a plane and shipped her home to Texas without warning. Hurt and confused, my wife and I took Andria under our wing to love and restore her. After a year had passed, I hired Andria as our school receptionist and church custodian. Within two years I hired her as my personal secretary.

By the time Andria reached her fifth year of employment, time management and the stress of juggling several departments became overwhelming for her. Upon spending a few weeks that summer doing missionary work in Columbia, Andria realized that it was time to leave the comforts of Texas. She set her sights on Seattle, Washington, to start her life over in banking. Keeping in close touch with her, our family was quite excited when the Lord called us to Portland. With only a three-hour drive apart, we visited each other monthly as we started anew in the Pacific Northwest. Then, when my wife and I divorced just a year later, Andria took it upon herself to begin making bimonthly weekend trips to assist my son in making sure I was being taken care of.

During my darkest times, it was Dillon and Andria who made sure I got out of bed on weekends and stayed active. Never asking for anything, and never pushing me to talk, Andria was a true friend to me and Dillon in hopes of keeping us encouraged. She and my son began playing tennis together while she and Cassie would talk on the phone. When the news of a second church split made it to Andria, she quickly received approval from her bank and notified me that she was moving to Portland to assist Dillon and me with the church. I could hardly believe my ears. I had never known anyone with such a heart and wondered if there might be more to this woman than just a daughter and friend.

Once Cassie was home for summer break, both of my kids seized the opportunity to confront me regarding Andria. To my surprise, Dillon requested that I marry Andria the following week while Cassie wondered why we weren't already dating. Having

already won their approval, along with the approval of my best friends, I gathered the courage one summer evening to call and ask her to dinner. To my surprise, she said yes without hesitation.

By September of that year and with only a few short weeks of dating, my mind was set. Andria was the only woman left in the world I could trust. The more I got to know her the more I began falling in love with her. The more I fell in love with her, the more I wanted to be with her every day, for the rest of my life. So by the time the month's end drew near, I got the nerve to propose.

On a cool September evening in Cannon Beach, I risked all and knelt on one knee. No sooner did I kneel did she begin to laugh. Prior to our evening, I pictured her crying and falling into my arms as violins played harmoniously in the background. However, reality was so much better. Her laughter was met with tears of joy and her "yes" was definite. We started our engagement laughing and embracing, a trademark of our marriage to come.

Seven months later, with over fifty friends and family members gathered, we said our vows to each other on the beach of Ocean Shores, Washington. Thankfully everyone braved the thirty-eight-degree driving rains and gale-force winds to witness our blessed union. For us, it was the most glorious day on earth! On April 23, 2016, I married the true love of my life, the greatest, gracious, and most beautiful woman I had ever known. Until then, I believed I knew what love was. But that day she changed everything. She helped me experience genuine love. It's a beautiful thing waking up every day with someone who believes you to be Superman. She is my love, best friend and the inspiration behind this book.

2 Corinthians 4:8–10 (NCV): "We have troubles all around us, but we are not defeated. We do not know what to do, but we do not give up the hope of living. We are persecuted, but God does not leave us. We are hurt sometimes, but we are not destroyed."

Sometimes life can look bleak when we're in the midst of trouble. If you study the verse above, every time Paul described the challenges he faced, he followed it with a phrase that started with "but..." In other words, our story doesn't end with our troubles. We may appear defeated, but...we're not. We cannot give up hope. No matter how empty it may feel, God does not and will not ever leave us to ourselves. No matter how bleak it appears, we are not finished, done, or destroyed.

I have watched God use the most unsuspecting people to bring encouragement and a lifeline when in need. Sometimes the hardest thing to do is to get up, get dressed, and stay the course. I know, because I was there. I learned that, no matter how dark it appears, darkness will never overcome the light. The light will come on, and the path will illuminate when we allow patience to be our driving force. That's why you cannot afford to give up.

Never give up.

THE HOME SECURITY CONSULTATION

Bounding out from the car were two individuals, a man and a woman.

***They quickly grabbed the girl and shoved her in the car.
The man driving the car was in camouflage.***

One day, my full-time sales job brought me to a customer requesting a new home security evaluation. As I pulled up in front of his house, the chain-link fence surrounding the property had signs posted that the house was protected by camera surveillance, which is an unusual sign for someone requesting home security. I was greeted by a somewhat frantic, half-fried-looking individual on the porch and was quickly invited inside. Once inside, the man's wife walked me to their living room where, next to their two-month old asleep on the floor, was a large flat screen television displaying four cameras in action. The customer proceeded to explain that the reason he needed me there was to replace all four cameras with my company's cameras so that he could have a more solid connection while monitoring the drug and sex-trafficking ring down the street.

In a moment of awkward silence, I stared at the customer waiting for him to tell me that he was joking. He wasn't joking. Being somewhat weirded out, and never having handled such a request, I proceeded to explain to him that home-alarm companies are for the home, not for watching neighbors. Frustrated with my response, he led me outside and across the street toward his neighbor's home.

As he unlatched the side gate to enter, I questioned his permission to trespass. Apparently this was his rental property and his tenants were not home. Taking him at his word, I reluctantly entered whereby he walked me to the far corner of the yard. There stood a ten-foot high broken-down shed placed next to a framed metal carport. As we approached the carport, the man pointed to his

problematic camera that he kept losing connection to. Cut out of a fence board, underneath the roof of the carport, was a tiny camera stuck in the hole of the fence. The camera was perfectly positioned for him to spy on the adjacent street.

At this point I was confused on how to proceed. I had come with the intention of discussing a home security system for the home, not selling cameras to spy on neighbors. What part of home security did this guy not understand? As I began to backtrack with him regarding why I could not help him, he led me to an opening in the fence line for a better view of the street.

Agreeing to look, I peered through the fence. He asked me to focus my attention on the fourth house down, where three individuals were seen getting out of a car. Curious as to what was happening, I watched as the three were met by someone inside the house. A bag was exchanged between them, then the three of them followed the man back into the house. My would-be customer quickly explained that I was witnessing a drug deal in broad daylight. He explained that these “deals” happened twenty to thirty times per day, and that young girls were escorted in and out of the house just as often. He was in cooperation with the sheriff’s department, and thus the need for a more reliable camera system.

I turned to look at him in utter amazement. This was all too surreal. As we walked back toward his home, I tried my best to again explain how my company didn’t service his kind of need. As he turned to lock the gate behind him, I noticed one of our company’s service vehicles a few houses down. In an effort to stall and get a second opinion, I told my would-be customer that I would meet him at his house after I discussed his request with our technician.

No sooner did I begin the conversation with our tech did I witness a stranger dressed in camouflage walking up the driveway of the rental property. The stranger looked both ways, unlatched the fence, and closed the gate behind him. I quickly left my conversation and ran inside the front door of the customer’s home, forgetting to knock. Startled to see me burst in, I told him what I witnessed. It was at this point that I felt myself getting sucked in to the psychotic

neighborhood drama. Rather than looking alarmed, my customer calmly and peacefully sat down on the bench in his hallway. Apparently the guy in the camouflage was his gardener.

I had seen enough crime shows to know this guy didn't look or act like a gardener, much less dress like one. I insisted the customer check the guy out. Instead he opened his legal pad in hopes of writing down a full quote on the cost of equipping his home with our security. Taking a deep breath, with one eye out the glass entryway door, I began to explain what our system was designed to do, and what it wasn't. What happened next was hair raising.

"Help me! Somebody help me!" screamed a voice running down the street.

Startled by the cries, we ran to the glass door. Before us was a young woman running as quickly as she could while trying to dial a number on her cell phone. When she glanced at us in panic and fear, my customer and his wife jumped into action.

"Honey, it's the girl!" he cried. "Grab your gun!" he yelled to his wife as she ran toward the kitchen.

In seconds his wife ran past us and out the front door, waving her .45 pistol high in the air. My home security evaluation was rapidly morphing into a sequel of the movie *Taken*, except I felt more like a studio fill-in who gets paid to look bewildered. As his wife ran toward the road, a small car came racing past his wife, braking hard as it pulled up next to the screaming girl. Bounding out from the car were two individuals, a man and a woman. They quickly grabbed the girl and shoved her in the car. The man driving the car was in camouflage.

"Hey, that's the guy who was in your backyard!" I shouted to the customer.

"That's not my gardener!" the customer shouted back.

My customer raced toward the living room, past the sleeping infant, grabbed another pistol, and ran out the door. I watched as the husband and wife dynamic duo ran frantically down the street, yelling, waving pistols, and chasing after the kidnapper's car. Thankfully no shots were fired. However, the young escapee had

been captured. It was at that moment that I started wondering why on earth I was still standing in these people's home. I had felt somewhat of a responsibility to the infant, still asleep on the floor, but for the most part I started thinking it best that I run as fast as I could to my car, the first chance I got.

The couple turned and ran back toward me, barreling through the front door. Frantically calling 911, my customer said his name and then spoke with someone in dispatch as though they were business partners. Apparently this was their fifth call of the day. They were able to catch the screaming girl on camera and proceeded to tell 911 they were about to upload the image to the sheriff's database. It was at this point that I realized my customer was legit.

I stood in their home speechless and not quite sure what to do. The customer reached his hand out toward me to shake it and asked if I would be willing to testify to the kidnapping I had witnessed. In somewhat of a daze, I shook his hand and agreed to testify. Now it was my turn to run. Forgetting why I was even there, I wished them well and walked rather quickly to my car, hoping to never return.

One month later my wife and I were watching the news as the top story ran across the screen. The county sheriff's department, with the help of an unnamed citizen, were able to arrest over two dozen individuals involved in a drug-trafficking ring and free up a host of young girls in a sex-trade ring located in the very neighborhood I had visited.

Matthew 6:34 (TLB): "So don't be anxious about tomorrow. God will take care of your tomorrow too. Live one day at a time."

By the time I had left the place, I realized things could have gone much worse for me and for the customer. I was thankful that I came home alive that evening. Sometimes in life the difference between going forward and giving up is nothing more than living another day. I've had days whereby my only goal seemed to be in saying, "Whew! I made it."

There are times when focusing on the day at hand is all the strength you can muster. That, my friend, is okay. Life can get overwhelming when faced with daily requirements, quotas, goals, and expectations. It's easy to get caught up in life's gerbil wheel, believing everything is based entirely upon our performance.

It's at those times when we must go back to Jesus' instruction by turning our anxieties over to Him. God can handle day two, three, and four, so that you can focus on breathing today. Not giving up isn't about a mad dash to the finish line. It's about learning to live from the inside out and understanding how to enjoy it. It's about not giving up. My friend, you cannot afford to give up.

Never give up.

THE GREATEST DOG KNOWN TO MANKIND

When the results came back from the new tests, the cancer had remained, but for some reason it had stopped progressing. Andria and I knew the reason.

Upon marrying Andria, I inherited two canine children, two of the world's greatest miniature schnauzers. Spencer, an all-black male, was seven at the time while his sister Gracie, an all-white female, was five. The two of them were peas in a pod and loved nothing more than to play together. Spencer was poised and dignified, in charge of the home but barked like a girl. Gracie was soft and quiet but loved to roughhouse and lived to get dirty. To describe them as loud and playful was an understatement. They loved their mama, their road trips, and best of all, the beach.

One morning Spencer, or Bubs as we called him, was acting rather worn out and tired. I went to rub his head and noticed that his neck was stiff and swollen. Hoping that he didn't get into something serious, I booked an appointment with the veterinarian that day. What began as a routine checkup became the worst news possible. Before tests were even run, the visual prognosis was lymphoma, cancer of the lymph glands. They took some blood and told us they'd call us back within two days. By the next day, Bubs could barely breathe and barely lift his head. We rushed him back to the veterinarian and were told he had only days to live.

We were speechless. Stunned, shocked, and unprepared with how this transpired so quickly, we needed to regroup and figure out what to do. I consulted the vet doctor for different options, none of which were appealing. It was as though our little buddy lay dying in front of our eyes, and there was nothing we could do to help him. The doc gave us the option of giving him a small liquid dosage of chemo to see if he would respond. We needed more than five days to figure out what to do, and Bubs was in dire need of relief.

Reluctantly Andria and I agreed to the small dosage in hopes of buying us some time. Within two minutes of the dosage, Spencer was upright, back to himself and ready to play. By the evening the lumps disappeared, and it appeared as though nothing had transpired. Yet we knew this was only the beginning.

I remember reading the story of King Hezekiah in Bible times, who was destined to die of a terminal disease. He begged the man of God for more time to live, and God in turn granted him fifteen more years. With knowing that Bubs was down to only days left to live, I figured it was time to pray. If God was gracious enough to grant fifteen years to a human being, I wondered if He would be gracious enough to grant fifteen more months to our beloved Spencer. Armed with my request, I prayed earnestly and asked God to grant our puppy mercy.

I wasted no time to begin researching information on this form of cancer, found in both people and pets. After a couple of days I came across a doctor who had lived in Germany and discovered a simple holistic formula that when ingested daily would cause the healthy blood cells to properly identify the cancer cells and attack them. Believing that God heard my prayer, by the end of the week we changed Spencer's diet to fresh fish, vegetables, and the holistic German formula. Now came the task of getting him to eat it.

I have always believed in miracles. I also believe that God loves us more than we know. The first day we changed Spencer's diet was almost unbelievable. Nothing in dog world signified our dog would eat this diet, but Bubs literally loved it. Of course Gracie stayed as far away from her brother's new choice of food as possible, as there was nothing tasty to a dog or human about this diet. After one week we watched as Spencer grew stronger, more alert, and healthier. The same went for the second week. When I took him back to see his doctor, they were amazed it was the same dog. When the results came back from the new tests, the cancer had remained, but for some reason it had stopped progressing. Andria and I knew the reason.

From that day forward and like clockwork, every eight weeks Spencer's lymph nodes would slowly begin to swell. As they did, his energy would wain and his little body would slow down. With each swelling came a visit to his doc accompanied by a small injection of chemo. Following the injection, the nodes would shrink and Spencer was back to his normal self, leaving his doctor somewhat speechless. However, by the time we had reached month thirteen, things began to change.

The small injections of chemotherapy were beginning to show signs of deterioration in our little Bubs. By the time he reached month fourteen, Spencer began playing less and became easily irritable. Committed to the diet and committed to keep him healthy, we did our best to accommodate him. Sadly as we entered month fifteen, we knew his time was coming to an end. With his energy and weight beginning to diminish, I planned a weekend camping excursion near Mount Rainier for the whole family to be together. The next morning, Spencer was eyeing the homemade bread we were toasting over the open fire and I couldn't refuse him. It was the first time he wanted anything but his special diet. Knowing we were only days away, I wanted him to enjoy some of the finer things in life, like fresh bread! He loved every morsel of that bread and couldn't stop wagging his tail.

One week later we said our final good-byes to the greatest dog known to mankind. It was a tough day for all of us. God had truly granted our request and gave us the tools we needed to enable Bubs to enjoy his additional fifteen months.

2 Kings 20:5–6 (NKJV): “Return and tell Hezekiah the leader of My people, ‘Thus says the Lord, the God of David your father: “I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; surely I will heal you. On the third day you shall go up to the house of the Lord. And I will add to your days fifteen years...””

Not everything is as it appears. When you're faced with the end, the difference between life and death often lies within receiving a new instruction. So often people hear bad news or get an overwhelmingly bad report and immediately make preparations for the worst. I tell you a truth, something supernatural always happens when you mix tears with the prayer of faith. God can make a way, when there seems to be no way. Something happens when we believe. Besides, what is there to lose by not giving up? That's why you cannot afford to give up.

Never give up.

THE KILAUEA VOLCANO

The composition of lava rock with rain was comparable to asphalt covered with ice. If we weren't in trouble before, we were in trouble now.

It had finally come! It was the chance to get away, just the two of us, and celebrate our first anniversary. We saved our money and set our sights on the Hawaiian Islands for two full weeks of sun, sand, and each other. Having never been to the Big Island, we booked our first week's stay there and booked our second week on the island of Oahu. We planned to alternate every day between having an adventure day followed by a beach/rest day. It was the perfect plan for the perfect honeymoon.

Our flight landed on a beautiful Monday evening in the tropical city of Kailua Kona. After retrieving our rental car and arriving at our vacation home, we took a short walk to the beach to catch one of the most incredible sunsets known to mankind. Embracing, Andria and I could hardly believe we had finally made it. Having been married thirteen months earlier to the day, this was a well-planned dream come true. With nothing and no one else competing for our time, we had the next two glorious weeks ahead with no pressure, phone calls, or stress. This wasn't Heaven, but it was close.

Excited and a little messed up by the time change, we awoke early the next morning for our day of adventure. We planned to visit the world-renowned Hawaii Volcanoes National Park. I had picked up some pamphlets from the airport and brought them along with me in case of the odd chance that we got there and didn't know what to see. Upon driving a couple of hours, including several miles of winding roads up and around mountainsides, we arrived at our first stop. There, in the midst of volcano central, was their infamous museum and gift shop. Andria and I played the role of curious tourists, looking and shopping for every cool trinket we could buy. To

our surprise we ran into one of the park rangers, meeting and greeting the visitors.

Bright-eyed and full of enthusiasm, the ranger conveyed her love for the park and then strongly encouraged us to tackle the relatively easy hiking trail across the lava fields. She promised it would be worth the walk, summing it up with the prize of watching 4,000-degree magma bubbling explosively into the ocean. Her excitement was so contagious she convinced us both to do it. Without a moment's hesitation we jumped into our car and began our descent toward the base of the mountain for the hike of a lifetime.

As we arrived at the base of the volcano, in the distance we could see huge plumes of smoke and sulfuric gases billowing out from the ocean.

"It's the lava!" I exclaimed.

Parking our car, we made our way toward the walking path. As we did, we passed a tiny shack, warning visitors to come prepared. "Gloves, pants, boots, and one gallon of water per person," the sign read. We chuckled. Nobody we could see was wearing pants and boots, much less gloves, here. Furthermore we had intel from the park ranger that this was to be an easy hike! Just to make sure we stayed hydrated, Andria grabbed a bottle of water for us both. We looked at each other and smiled. We were set and ready to conquer. As far as our eye could see was a tiny paved walking path ahead. I just shook my head in disbelief. This was going to be the easiest hike ever.

With the warm afternoon sun on our backs we journeyed along the path for about a half mile until it turned to gravel. Thankfully the gravel bed was hard, making the walk a breeze. By the time we crossed the one-mile mark, we came upon a few individuals bloodied and hobbling their way back to the parking lot. I imagined them to have obviously exited the trail, trying to create an adventure of their own. I smiled at them as we passed, wondering how they managed to get so beat up.

By the time we reached our second mile of gravel roads, our personal supply of water was already running out. It was just in time,

however. The path began veering sharply toward the ocean, finally bringing us closer to the monstrous plumes we had seen earlier. Intrigued yet feeling a little worn from the heat, we assumed we were only a short distance away from our destination. However, our assumptions quickly diminished when there in front of us, stood two rather large barricades. Plastered on the barricades were signs that warned of no entry with the potential of lung damage from the sulfuric gases. Surprised and confused, Andria and I looked at each other. Was there really no way around the barricade? Did something change, and our hike got cut short? After staring oddly at the unusual signs, we soon realized that in order to continue with this hike we were supposed to cross the massive rock-cooled lava field to our left.

Befuddled by a host of conflicting emotions, I was surprised that our seemingly easy path had come to such an abrupt end. All that Andria and I could do at that point was to stand there and stare. Before us was a never-ending field of lava rocks stretching for miles, or so it appeared. With us both still intrigued, the thought of getting up close to flowing magma pushed us forward. I was convinced that we could do this.

To our right was a thin line of rope fastened to four-foot poles wedged deeply into the rocks. The rope line was to be our guide, stretching across the open lava field as far as the eye could see. Now according to the signs, the rope served two purposes. The first being the most obvious, to guide us. Second, it served to keep us from the lava rocks considered still active, or “hot” rocks. Wide-eyed Andria and I looked at each other. It was at that point that we simultaneously remembered the sign requiring us to wear hiking boots.

I don't ever recall hearing stories from anyone who walked on lava rocks before, and I soon realized why. Most people aren't this crazy. Shortly after getting underway, we came to the quick realization that this was no ordinary hike, and these were no ordinary rocks. As a matter of fact, to call them rocks was an understatement. They were boulders of cooled magma complete with ledges,

crevices, hills, and small cliffs. Their surface comprised of tiny shards of glass-like powder that could cut your flesh as fast as razors through a sheet. It was at that point that we simultaneously remembered the sign requiring us to wear pants and gloves.

As the afternoon wore on, there was literally no end in sight. Skillfully we climbed, jumped, and meandered our way along thousands of feet of rock, while staying close to the rope for a guide. With hot air and wisps of gas emitting from crevices deep beneath our feet, we journeyed onward for hours, pushing our bodies to their limits. As our afternoon turned to evening, the two of us were exhausted, exasperated, and dehydrated. Thankfully, the observatory was now in sight. However, it was at that point that we simultaneously remembered the sign requiring us to bring a gallon of water.

As we made it to the observation point, we were surprised to be accompanied by over one hundred other camera-ready tourists. Painstakingly we sat down on a grassy ledge whereby we could see what we worked so hard for. At this point neither I nor Andria fared well. She could hardly move her legs. I, on the other hand, couldn't get my legs to stop shaking. Together we sat in silence and in a daze. How did so many people cross over the long stretch of lava field with their cameras and stands? Disgusted, I looked back over my shoulder toward the east. There lay a long gravel road filled with parked vehicles. Apparently, our beloved park ranger forgot to tell us that there was an access road. I imagined her laughing at us over coffee break with her coworkers.

A long, windy mile down the coastline poured a small stream of lava into the cool ocean waters. As the waters cracked and popped, cameras clicked incessantly, causing the tourists to respond with glee. Us, on the other hand, spent each moment groaning in pain. Besides, one could barely see the lava with the naked eye, much less a zoom lens. To make matters worse, the sun had begun to set. We didn't imagine our adventure keeping us out this late, and neither of us had an action plan for hiking back in the dark. This was not the adventure we planned.

Within moments my wife and I were sitting in complete darkness. The tourists bailed rather quickly and were off to their next adventure. Gauging by the number of cars that left, it appeared as though we were the only ones crazy enough to hike the lava field. Taking a deep breath, I whispered a prayer. "God, help us."

At this point it felt as though we were short on everything, including food, water, energy, and a bed. It didn't help that we had barely eaten anything since breakfast. Although I see myself as one who welcomes a good challenge, I was ready and willing to wave the white flag of surrender before returning to the lava field. The moment was calling for strategy and a game plan, but I had none. Slowly and painfully we stood upright as our backs, legs, and feet began to pulsate. We pulled out our phones to double check their battery life. We were going to need the light from our phones, and we needed it to last. My phone showed a whopping 40 percent of life, while hers showed 30 percent. It was not great, but I figured it was enough to handle the hike. Andria suggested that she take the lead while I shone the light forward from behind. We could save one battery that way and it might be enough to last us the trip. Reluctantly we both took a few deep breaths, got our heads focused on the journey, and painfully took that first step.

Slowly and methodically we crossed crevices and hot gases while focusing on the light from my cell phone as to what lay ahead. We managed to take short breaks every fifteen minutes in order to catch our breaths and to check up on each other. After our second break, Andria began vomiting. She did her best to hold back the tears, but physical exhaustion was getting the best of her. Surrounded by complete darkness and struggling to maintain our focus, we encouraged each other to last long enough so as to make it to the next break.

As we pushed our bodies past the ninety-minute mark, Andria and I were taken by surprise when out of nowhere the heavens above us cracked with thunder and the skies opened on us below. As pleasant as the cool rains felt, rain was the absolute worst thing we could encounter. The composition of lava rock with rain was

comparable to asphalt covered with ice. If we weren't in trouble before, we were in trouble now.

No sooner did the treacherous thought cross my mind did I feel my feet begin to slip. What happened next was faster than my mind could process. As my right foot slid from the rock I was on, my body hurled backward. With no cognitive sense of my surroundings, I instinctively thrust my hands behind my back in hopes of reaching for the rock I was on and to brace for the fall. However, the rock I had been on was no longer behind me. My mind reeled as fast as my body fell, plunging me toward the jagged crevice. As I fell I lost grip of my phone, which hampered me from seeing anything. Helpless and in complete darkness, I felt as each lava rock mercilessly slammed and sliced into my legs and my back. With a crunch, my head exploded in writhing pain as I encountered the final rock of my slippery descent. As quickly as I fell, I could hear Andria shouting my name. With my phone lost somewhere in the rocky abyss, I was unable to get my bearings. All I could feel was the warm rainwater pouring down my face and filling my eyes. It was hard to describe how bad my hands, arms, back, and legs hurt. Within moments Andria managed to climb back to where I was and shine her phone on me. I had fallen a good five feet or more into the open crevice with my knee wedged deep under an adjacent rock. I soon discovered that the warm rainwater pouring down my face was blood. As she shone the light, it appeared as though I was bleeding from head to toe. Unable to move and unable to lift myself, I knew I was in rough shape.

"In Jesus' name," I mumbled as Andria reached down to help me up. As painful as the initial movement was, I somehow managed to untwist my leg from underneath the rock so that I could get into a sitting position. I used my shirt to clean the blood from my face and hands and sat there long enough to apply pressure to the open wound on my forehead. Thankfully, Andria was able to locate my phone and glasses, both of which were still intact. Concerned with my state of consciousness, she began asking me simple questions before moving on. Satisfied with my response, we waited a few

minutes longer for the flow of blood to lessen and the rain to stop. As it did, I painfully pushed my body upwards until I was able to stand.

With each step forward my leg grew stronger, as did my back. Step by step we carefully covered our last hour of rocks. I cannot ever remember being so relieved as I was when the light from our phone caught a glimpse of the long-forgotten barricades which lay ahead of us. We stumbled off the last rock only to slump down on an old park bench placed there. We made it and we were alive. The next two miles of walking path would be a breeze compared to what we had been through.

It was 2:00 a.m. before we finally stumbled through the door of our vacation home. I washed off my blood, counting ninety-six lacerations from head to toe, along with one decent-sized gouge on my forehead. Incoherent and exhausted, we both guzzled a half gallon of water before collapsing into bed. Upon turning off the bedside lamp, Andria fell asleep. I sighed deeply and was about to close my eyes, when at the foot of the bed I noticed a very tall figure staring at me.

I blinked my eyes, thinking I was seeing things. I wasn't. Clothed in a robe and towering at least eight feet high stood an angel with the most pleasant and seemingly gracious look upon his face. Neither he nor I, uttered a word. Whether because of exhaustion or the impact of his presence, I felt no feelings of fear, concern, or cause for alarm. He watched me as I laid there watching him. His calm yet stately presence caused an overwhelming feeling of comfort and security to flood my soul. It was as though he had come to remind me that I was going to be alright. "Thank you," I whispered softly. At those words he disappeared. I closed my eyes and drifted off to sleep.

Psalm 63:6–7 (NKJV): “When I remember You on my bed, I meditate on You in the night watches. 7 Because You have been my help, therefore in the shadow of Your wings I will rejoice.”

When complete darkness surrounds us and it seems there's no help in sight, we're never alone. God is always there. The Bible reveals story after story of how David, who wrote this psalm, was a true example of never giving up. When David laid his head on his pillow at night, he would remember these things about God. He's a protector. He's a shelter in the midst of the storm. He's our refuge and He's the One watching over us. You see, God has forever invested Himself into mankind to see that His will is done in the earth. One could say that God will always go to great lengths to protect His investment. That, being you and me! His love, plan and purpose for our lives stretches far beyond anything or anyone that would try to stop us short of seeing that come to fruition. My friend, that's why you cannot afford to give up.

Never, ever, ever give up.

What if you're not the only person facing giving up? Over the next thirty days, Pastor Shian Klassen will take you through a journey of his life, his losses and love with easy to read down to earth stories guaranteed to touch your heart. Faced with insurmountable circumstances, from childhood through adulthood, you will see that you are not alone in the struggle of never giving up. This must-read devotional is guaranteed to inspire and renew your hope that no matter how long the journey, or how big the obstacle ahead, never, ever give up.

Everyone gets challenged in life to their dreams and hopes. They are tested in their individual belief structure, peace of mind, and relationships as life will play out in a cold callous world. Pastors are thought to be strong, men and women of surmountable fortitude that don't deal with the "normal" hurts of life but Pastor Shian has written a quick read devotional inspirational book that deals with each of these challenges. Pastor Shian opens his heart and life so that all can see his life's success' and failures. These stories are told in a perspective that will help you not to give up.

As a Dr. of Biblical Counseling and a Dr of Clinical Temperament Therapy I found this book delightful. It was full of truth - both from living out principles of his faith which provided him strength and wisdom to NEVER GIVE UP. I recommend Pastor Shian Klassen's devotional book to begin your day as it will set a positive tone for the day so no matter what you face or are facing you NEVER GIVE UP.

*Dr. James D Craig
Elkin USA*

If you've ever felt like giving up and walking away, you are not alone. Everyone is faced with tough situations and seemingly insurmountable obstacles in life, but God has made a way for you. And what does that way look like? It begins and ends with never giving up as God works with you, to bring you through the all hard, the ugly, and the unfair junk that you will face in life.

In this book, you will be encouraged to keep moving forward as you read the 30 life stories that Pastor Shian shares from his own life. Did they really happen? Yes, they did, and in reading them you'll see how God can and will help you and those around you to overcome in life.

I highly recommend that you read these stories and share them with those around you over the next 30 days, as you are encouraged to never quit.

*Tim Merta
Liberty International Ministries*



Pastor Shian Klassen lives in Hillsboro Oregon with his wife, Andria. Together they oversee Your Church +Hillsboro, the first in a network of home churches across the Northwest. With over thirty years of ministry experience, Pastor Shian is best known for his humorous storytelling and real-life applications of the Bible.



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