

before God, and your path is yours and yours alone. Where God will choose to lead you and how God chooses to use your life cannot be predicted by how God has worked in the lives of others before you. Jesus' response to Peter was as straight-forward as it could possibly get: "If I want John to live and you to die, what is that to you? Your part is to follow Me. My part is to lead the way."

### IT'S A RISKY BUSINESS

Christianity as a civilized religion claims to have a group plan negotiated with God. Everybody gets the same package. And of course, the package is always the premium plan—get rich, get comfortable, get secure, get safe, get well when you get God. Everybody gets the John plan; nobody gets the Peter package. The result and proof of faith are that you get to live a life without risk, which is ironic when you realize that for the early church, faith was a risky business.

Hebrews 11 has become known as the "hall of faith." It begins with the declaration "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for" (vv. 1–2).

Throughout the chapter, the writer challenges us with the power and vitality of ancient faith. He points to individuals such as Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Joseph, and Moses. He even refers to some surprising faith heroes such as Rahab and Samson. In summarizing the exploits of this extraordinary list, the writer explains their qualifications by telling us, "Who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. Women received back their dead, raised to life again" (Hebrews 11:33-35).

This is the kind of stuff that all of us think of when we think of women and men of faith. When we live by faith, we don't die by the sword. When we live by faith, every battle is won and every enemy conquered. When we live by faith, lions go hungry, executioners become unemployed, and the Grim Reaper's prospects look grim.

But faith doesn't stop here. Oh, how I wish it did. It would make life so much easier. But it really only begins here. This short list of the faithful (and I want to emphasize

*short*) is pointing us not to the rule, but to the exception to the rule. These men and women are listed exactly because their lives were so extraordinary and the results were so unusual. I'm not saying that God doesn't work like this anymore. What I am saying is that God is just getting started. He has far deeper and more profound work to do in and through us.

Any understanding of faith that is genuinely rooted in the Scriptures must always make room for the "others." Who are the others? We don't exactly know. We just know how faith worked out in their lives. After all, isn't that what Jesus was preparing us for? Speaking to His disciples, Jesus said, "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first . . . 'No servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also" (John 15:18–20). Peter continued this theme by reminding us: "Do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ" (1 Peter 4:12–13).

Hebrews continues describing the heroes of faith in verse 35. After telling us that women received back their dead raised to life again, the writer states,

Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goat-skins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect. (Hebrews 11:35–40)

The others experienced a different result of faith. To say the very least, their lives were far less desirable than the lives of those we've come to know from biblical fame. Yet their lives were no less expressions of a life well lived and fully lived in the presence and power of God than those we aspire to emulate. All were commended for their faith. Although the first group of the faithful have names that will be known through-

out history, the others remain nameless. That is not because they lived a life of lesser faith, but because there were so many more of them.

All of them chose and walked the barbarian way, and they were blessed because they did not fall away on account of Jesus. They trusted Jesus with their lives, and they lost their lives on the journey. If you could interview any one of them, however, each would insist that even in the midst of the suffering and hardship, he was most fully alive. They were not disappointed in God because they did not misunderstand who He was. They understood His call, and they chose it willingly. John the Baptist would join their number. Some barbarians survive the night in the lion's den; others experience their darkest night and wake in eternity.

#### CONFESSIONS OF A DANGEROUS MIND

Mariah and I were in San Diego, and after an event, I had a mildly hostile encounter. The experience somewhat unnerved her. But more than anything else, it seemed to pique her curiosity. She asked, "You make a lot of people mad, don't you, Dad?"

"Sometimes."

Pressing further, she asked, "Has anyone ever tried to hurt you?"

"Yes."

"Has anyone ever tried to kill you?"

I said, "Sort of."

"Tell me," she insisted with as much excitement as I've seen in a father-daughter conversation.

So I described an encounter I wrote about in *An Unstoppable Force*. I told her there was an ex-convict who let me know while he was in prison that as soon as he was released, he was going to bring my life to a close. Instead of waiting for him when he hit the streets, I found him in the projects. Knowing I had Mariah captivated, I did everything I could to heighten the danger and mystery of the moment. I paused right after describing the dingy room in which only the two of us stood face-to-face—William holding open the same blade with which he had slit another man's throat; me with nowhere to go.

Before I could go on, Mariah couldn't keep it in. With panic in her eyes she blurted out, "Did he kill you?"

It may seem cruel, but I refused to tell her. It's possible

that even to this day, my daughter thinks her father is dead. (I need to add that Mariah gives me permission to share this story with you on the condition that I clearly communicate to you that she was very tired that night.)

The barbarian understands the story we're in differently from the one who is civilized. Although Mariah should have known the outcome of my story, in some ways she has a better understanding of reality than some of us. We've been taught that every story Jesus writes with our lives ends with "and they lived happily ever after." Mariah knows better. She knows that good people die, that men and women who make heroic choices do not always live to tell their own tales. Sometimes another must tell the stories of their lives, recall the memory of their courage. The civilized view of Jesus is that He always comes through for us. Like Superman, He always shows up just in time to protect us and save us from disaster. His purpose is to ensure our safety, our convenience, and our comfort.

For years I have made it my mission to destroy the influence of the Christian cliché "The safest place to be is in the center of the will of God," but just this past week my wife, Kim, introduced me to one of the earlier uses of this adage.

It's found in the diary of Corrie ten Boom. Corrie's sister, Betsie, was encouraging her with this hope. I've always had a great disdain for this statement, but I have to admit this particular context shows me how far we've strayed from how it must have been understood. For Corrie and Betsie, the promise of safety in the center of God's will was fleshed out in concentration camps during the Nazi holocaust of the Jews. And although Corrie lived to tell the story, Betsie died in the midst of it.

Clearly neither of them concluded that this expression conveyed a belief that God would keep them from suffering hardship and even death. Betsie's statement was a declaration that to walk in the character of Christ is always the right choice, regardless of outcome or consequence. We have somehow perverted this more primal understanding to a far more civilized one. Instead of finding confidence to live as we should regardless of our circumstances, we have used it as justification to choose the path of least resistance, least difficulty, least sacrifice. Instead of concluding it is best to be wherever God wants us to be, we have decided that wherever it is best for us to be is where God wants us. Actually, God's will for us is less about our comfort than it is about our contribution.



God would never choose for us safety at the cost of significance. God created you so that your life would count, not so that you could count the days of your life.

### HIGH-RISK VENTURES

Do you think John the Baptist felt safe being in the center of the will of God while Jesus was busy proclaiming the good news to others, yet leaving him in prison? And when John was about to lose his head over his allegiance to the Son of God, do you think he was feeling overwhelmed by God's protecting hand?

If the safest place to be is in the center of the will of God, then how do you explain the life and ministry of Stephen—one sermon and then stoned to death? Was he really that bad? If the safest place to be is in the center of the will of God, then why is it that the biblical word for *witness* is actually the word for *martyr*?

If the safest place to be is in the center of the will of God, then how do you explain the experience of Paul? Paul walked with God, and certainly whatever the center of the will of God looks like, Paul had to have visited there at least a few times in

his life. His journals, however, described not a life filled with safety and certainty, but a life of adventure and danger. Paul said of his journeys:

I have . . . been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. (2 Corinthians 11:23–27)

Somebody forgot to tell Paul how safe the center of God's will was. Having been given that insight, wouldn't he have

known to redirect his life? Danger would have been his first clue that he was out of God's will—unless, of course, he was a barbarian. Paul had heard the barbarian call. He knew exactly who Jesus was and the life to which he had been called. Paul had been a religionist. He had learned the art of condemning others while hiding behind his pompous self-righteousness—which, by the way, is one of the great dangers of religion.

There may not be a more dangerous weapon for violence or oppression than religion. It seems counterintuitive, but when human beings create religions, we use them to control others through their guilt and shame. True religion always moves us to serve others and to give our lives to see those oppressed find freedom. Paul persecuted followers of Christ and even instigated their deaths, but then he risked his own life so that others might live. He once personified the very worst that happens when a religion becomes civilized. It moves away from God and oppresses humanity in God's name. Paul was once consumed by religion, but then he was transformed by the living presence of God Himself.

We, too, must find the barbarian way out of civilization. How have we come to this sanitized view of the faith to which

Jesus calls us? Somewhere along the way the movement of Jesus Christ became civilized as Christianity. We created a religion using the name of Jesus Christ and convinced ourselves that God's optimal desire for our lives was to insulate us in a spiritual bubble where we risk nothing, sacrifice nothing, lose nothing, worry about nothing. Yet Jesus' death wasn't to free us from dying, but to free us from the fear of death. Jesus came to liberate us so that we could die up front and then live. Jesus Christ wants to take us to places where only dead men and women can go.

I wonder how many of us have lost our barbarian way and have become embittered with God, confused in our faith because God doesn't come through the way we think He should. Is it possible that the transforming power of the church has been lost because we keep inviting people to step into the comfort, safety, and security of Jesus Christ? We've created a religious culture in which—even though we're the most blessed society in the history of the planet—our best-selling literature still focuses on how we can be more blessed. Maybe we need to step way back to the beginning of this movement.

The original call of Jesus was so simple, so clean, so clear:

"Follow Me." He wants us to surrender our lives to Him and follow Him into the unknown. And if it means a life of suffering, hardship, and disappointment, it will be worth it because following Jesus Christ is more powerful and more fulfilling than living with everything in the world minus Him. Have we forgotten this? Have we become so refined and so civilized that the benefits of our faith have become more precious and more valuable to us than the Benefactor of our faith?

I wonder how many of us are in that place of John the Baptist, at that crucible where God is asking, "Are you willing to lose everything on My behalf to gain everything I desire for you? Rather than living a long life, are you willing to live a life worth living?"

## YOU FIRST

The Church Communication Network sent me an invitation to do a session on leadership at one of their national conferences. I had actually been unaware that training was available through this satellite system known as CCN. I had been asked to do a session where I would follow one of the

most credible experts on church leadership. I was honored to get to do something in partnership with the caliber of leaders that were involved. I was both excited and nervous as I prepared to follow the main speaker. Somewhere in his lecture he started to say something that totally threw me. Point-blank he instructed, "Don't be an innovator; be an early adopter."

Hearing that created a crisis for me since I place an extremely high value on innovation. At Mosaic, the community where I serve as lead pastor in Los Angeles, we don't describe ourselves as a modern church or a postmodern church, a contemporary church or an emerging church. The only description I use is that we're an experimental church. We volunteered to be God's R&D Department. Anything He wants to do that other churches do not want to do or are unwilling to do, we'd like to take on. A part of our ethos (the spirit of our congregational culture) is a value for risk, sacrifice, and creativity.

The speaker went on to explain that the innovator is the guy who eats the poisonous mushroom and dies. The early adopter is the guy right next to him, who doesn't have to eat it. He can learn from the innovator's misfortune. Made per-

fect sense to me. That's why he's the man. Curious to me was my perception that he had pretty much been an innovator, the kind of guy who had eaten some pretty bad mushrooms and just happened to live to tell about it.

Before I knew it, it was my turn. Whatever I had planned to talk about was irrelevant to what was banging around in my head. *Should I stop being an innovator? Was the wise choice to become an early adopter?* But my mind wouldn't stop there. *What happened if everyone became an early adopter? Who would be the innovator? If no one ate the mushroom, how would we ever know which ones are safe? Without innovators, who could we depend on to die?*

With all this running through my brain, I let my talk go where the lecture and perhaps God's Spirit guided me. After thanking him for his amazing contribution to the body of Christ and for mentoring me through his books and ministry, I went on to thank him for a new metaphor for my life. I am a mushroom eater.

I understand the risks. Perhaps more than ever before, the implications are clear—any day now might be my last supper. But without risking the poisonous mushroom, we never would have discovered the joys of portobellos. In a

short time I gave this a lot of thought: *Why did that guy eat that first poisonous mushroom?* Which led me to other profound questions: *What could possibly have motivated someone to eat a sea cucumber or a jellyfish? What exactly drove that first consumer to eat a raw oyster or to decide that snails were for more than stepping on?*

My conclusion was simple: they were hungry, maybe even starving. If you're trapped at sea long enough, maybe you begin to wonder if the same jellyfish that stung you could also satisfy you. I could see a father with starving children boil up a pot of snails, call them escargot, and begin dinner by saying, "Look, children, we're rich and sophisticated." Before aristocracy dubbed fish eggs "caviar," some mother stretching the catch of the day to feed her entire family simply called it "dinner."

Innovation is a life skill. When we're surrounded by civilization, innovation tends to be motivated by boredom. When we are barbarians trying to reach barbarians, innovation is motivated by love. Barbarians are a people of the earth. We know how to survive in the wild. We understand that whoever walks in front walks closest to death, but even this knowledge does not slow us down.



The barbarian call is just this simple: we are called to be mushroom eaters. A world without God cannot wait for us to choose the safe path. If we wait for someone else to take the risk, we risk that no one will ever act and that nothing will ever be accomplished. John the Baptist was a mushroom eater, and it cost him his life. Jesus, too, was a mushroom eater, and He found Himself nailed to a tree. Neither man saw his thirty-fifth birthday. Both of them point to the barbarian way.

### CALLED OUT

If you don't like the idea of being an innovator, that's fine. Just do whatever Jesus calls you to do the moment it is clear to you. Do not procrastinate; do not hesitate; do not deviate from whatever course of action He calls you to. But I want to warn you, the closer you walk with Christ, the greater the faith required. The more you trust Him, the more you'll risk on His behalf. The more you love Him, the more you will love others. If you genuinely embrace His sacrifice, you will joyfully embrace a sacrificial life. Your expectations of Jesus will change as your intimacy with Him deepens. When you

begin to follow passionately after Jesus, you will inadvertently find yourself innovating. After all, Jesus is transforming lives, writing history, creating the future, and unleashing the kingdom of God. If you plan to keep step with Jesus the Pioneer, you better expect some changes.

Our civilized faith demands caviar and escargot; our barbaric faith accepts that we might have to eat fish eggs and snails. We look to Jesus not to fulfill our shallow longings or to provide for us creature comforts. We look to Him to lead us where He needs us most and where we can accomplish the most good.

Barbarians hear a call different from that of civilized Christians. We understand clearly that we follow the God who chose the way of the Cross. If Jesus would not avoid the "place of the skull," then we should not be surprised where He might lead us. If even He found Himself sweating blood at Gethsemane, then we should be certain we will stand at crisis moments where all we can do after asking for relief is declare, "Not my will, but Yours." In those moments you may find very few who stand by you to provide you comfort and strength, and strangely enough, you may find far too many trying to reason with you that God

would never require so much of anyone. Yet even with all the noise pounding inside your head, you will still clearly hear the voice of Christ and His barbarian call if you listen carefully enough.

