FRONT COVER

INSIDE FRONT COVER

KELLY TALAMO

ambushed by God



an EvangelismSHIFT resource

Unless otherwise indicated: the Bible version used throughout this book is the New American Standard Bible (NASB).

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dedication

Look into the heart of Jesus Christ
and you will find unconditional and unfailing love.

This book is dedicated to the two people in my life who model that kind of love like no other human beings I have ever met.

To my mother, Shirley Talamo.
She never ceases to love.

And to my wife Mary.
My constant encourager, lover and friend.
Who loved me enough to say, "Kelly, we need Jesus."
Together, we came to Christ. And together, we will finish the

foreword

Ambushed by God would be worth the purchase if only for the sheer pleasure of listening in to one well-crafted story after another. But Kelly Talamo is more than a story-teller – he is also an animated and insightful teacher who communicates the principles of lifestyle evangelism through a delightful series of engaging and instructive illustrations from his own experiences. As you read these stories, you will be both challenged and encouraged to embrace a ministry mindset that involves growth and reproduction.

Ambushed by God encourages us to develop a lifestyle of evangelism and discipleship. When we are part of the process of introducing people to Jesus and encouraging them to grow after they have come to know Him, we discover that our own

passion and spiritual vitality is enhanced. Few joys compare with the experience of seeing a friend come to new life in Christ. And one of life's deepest satisfactions is witnessing the gradual miracle of personal transformation in converts who get serious about becoming disciples. By contrast, the mediocrity of non-discipleship cuts off the fruit of the Spirit and leads to a lack of love, joy and peace.

Evangelism and discipleship are concrete expressions of love and purpose. Since the God-infused love of agapê relates to the steady intention of one's will toward another's highest good, it chooses to seek the supreme good for both unbelievers and believers. Clearly, the greatest good for those who do not know Christ is to be delivered from the domain of darkness, death and condemnation and to be transferred to the kingdom of the light, life and love of God (Colossians 1:13-14). And the highest good for those who do know Christ is to mature into His likeness through increasing conformity to His image (Romans 8:29). Thus, our purpose is to express the agapê of God through evangelism (to unbelievers) and edification (to believers).

All of us give our lives in exchange for something, whether this is temporal or eternal. "For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?" (Matthew 16:26). If we are wise, we will follow Jesus by giving our lives in exchange for people. The apostle Paul knew this was the most significant way to live: "Having so fond an affection for you, we were well-pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become very dear to us" (1 Thessalonians 2:8). As Dag Hammarskjold noted, "It is more noble to give yourself completely to one individual than to labour diligently for the salvation of the masses."

Ambushed by God is a collection of real life stories about an ordinary guy who understands and embraces his extraordinary mission in life.

Simply put, the situations that Kelly Talamo writes about are everyday situations that you and I find ourselves in all the time. But as you will see, everyday situations can become spiritual opportunities when viewed through the lens of a renewed mind.

I invite you to journey with Kelly in Ambushed by God. And as you do, remember that you too have a story. You are the one that God may want to use next in His divine ambush. And, may God enrich your life as you yield it to His.

Dr Kenneth Boa
President, Reflections Ministry
Atlanta, GA

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introduction

(by John North)

The journey to develop EvangelismSHIFT began years ago in my own heart and life and this book, Ambushed by God, was a big part of my journey.

Ever since I put my faith in Christ as a teenager, I've been involved in evangelism. For the past 20 years I've been a part of Ambassadors for Christ International–Australia, where our whole focus is on accelerating the spread of the gospel by helping local churches be more effective in evangelism.

About six years ago I began developing a small group resource to train believers in how to be a more effective witness for Jesus in their daily relationships. I chose a name, began selecting key Bible passages and thought through the content. But God stopped me in my tracks. In the middle of my

preparation one day, it was as if God were challenging me, "You can't train people to live as witnesses. You yourself are not living that way!"

I was so convicted and challenged as I realised that this was the truth! Although my whole ministry was about evangelism, it was all organised evangelism. I would go into the city to do evangelism on the streets, or I would lead a mission trip overseas to do evangelism or I would speak at evangelistic events organised by churches, or develop evangelistic resources. All of these were fruitful; people were coming to Christ. Yet, in my daily encounters with people I was not living as a witness. I remember my eyes watering up with tears as I talked to my accountability guys about how God was speaking to me.

I made an absolute commitment to begin living as a witness. I thought it would happen naturally and easily since I already knew how to effectively communicate the gospel. I couldn't have been more wrong. I discovered that I needed a whole new way of approaching people, a new way of thinking about my daily life and encounters. I also needed to learn some relational principles and skills. I needed to learn from those who were already living this lifestyle.

Right at that time I came across Kelly Talamo's book. My accountability guys and I began to read it together, out loud. Kelly's insights on developing a ministry mindset toward everyone you encounter, and his many examples of what these encounters have looked like in his own life were just the "how" that I needed. It took time to develop a new way of interacting with people, but it was so worth the journey! Learning to live this way has really changed my whole life.

Now that I have been learning to live as a witness for several

years, I'm so excited to be passing on the lessons I have learned to others, and to introduce you to this book that has impacted me so deeply. I'm grateful to God and to Kelly for this book and pray that you'll grow in your witness too as you see how you could fit into the stories that Kelly describes.

Open your heart and invite God to change and grow you as you read!

John North
Ambassadors for Christ International–Australia

chapter 1

living life with a ministry mindset

Ambushed by God is a collection of short stories about an ordinary guy who has some very extraordinary experiences sharing the life of Christ with the people in his life. These stories are true and are in no way embellished.

Webster defines ambush as: "an entrapment; to lie in wait; to bait or to be drawn into."

Growing up as a child, some of my fondest memories consisted of watching Roy Rogers on Saturday morning TV. It was a personal ritual and Roy was my personal hero.

My stomach would be in knots as the bad guys would somehow lure Roy and the good guys into a box canyon. When suddenly there was no place to go, the bad guys would come out from behind the rocks with guns blazing. Roy would

then yell "Ambush!"…and the good guys would take cover. Luckily it was only television and my hero would always escape with no more than a "flesh wound".

That little scenario, I believe, depicts an attitude that many evangelicals have toward evangelism. The only difference is that the good guys (believers) are trying to lure the bad guys (non-believers) into our evangelical trap. Suddenly, when they least expect it, we spring our witness on them, or perhaps hit them with a gospel rock and somehow capture them for the kingdom of God.

Personally, I don't see it like that at all. In fact, I don't believe that we have the ability or the opportunity to spiritually ambush anyone. No matter how clever our planning or how subtle our methods, people are simply too sharp and the task too complex for that kind of thinking. Besides, people can smell a religious agenda a mile away. And once they do, they're gone.

Divine Drama

But I will say that behind the veil of what is seen, there is an ambush taking place. Yes, I believe that there is an entrapment in the making. With each passing day, the sovereign hand of God is making moves that affect lives, not only on the temporal level but also on the eternal. And, the most exciting thing about it is that you and I can play a significant part in this cosmic drama. Here is where anyone who is willing can be used by God.

The scripture says that, "No man comes unless the Father draws him." Ever wonder what the draw is that brings people

closer to God? Certainly many things contribute. Personal circumstances, inner emptiness, and natural revelation may all have a part. In fact, the list is endless and I for one will certainly not attempt to limit or predict what God can and will do when He wants to draw someone to Himself.

But there is another drawing card that God uses daily in His divine magnetism. There is another component that God has planted in the cracks of society that makes the non-believer stop, take note, enquire, and even change directions and move towards Himself. It's us!

We are the "fragrant aroma of Christ in every place." We are the "salt" that makes life tasty for the first time, or stops the rot in society. We are the "light" that penetrates a dark world or a dark mind.

Simply put, the reality of Jesus Christ living in and through our lives acts like bait for the non-believer. That's right. I said bait. (The concept of fishermen just got bigger.) Our lives can bait with an incredible scent of hope, causing people to move toward the source of that hope and ask questions.

The moment we allow Jesus Christ to radiate His life through us in any way, we become divine bait for the kingdom of God. As people are drawn to us, God is then able to take it to the next step. He has them where He wants them (around us)! He then may choose to further use us to sow, plant, water, or yes, even close the deal! That next step depends on where they are spiritually, and our faithfulness to whatever opportunity He then gives. And that opportunity may require only silence. Now that's a freeing concept.

Guilt, Frustration, or Freedom?

Most people that I talk to about evangelism live in one of two categories. They are either frustrated about the lack of results they see from sharing their faith, or they feel guilty that they don't share at all. As children of the king, I don't believe that God would have us live in either of those camps.

Think it through. Why would God put us in a position to share the greatest verbal sentences there are (the gospel) and then have us frustrated about how it went?

Well, let's set that one straight right from the beginning. We never have, nor will we ever have, anything to do with the results from how or when we shared our faith.

The sharing of our faith is a spiritual work. The contact of the Word of God and the witness of God with the spirit of a lost person happens in the spiritual dimension. It is the Holy Spirit and only the Holy Spirit who quickens their spirit.

We may have been allowed to have a part in the person being drawn towards the Father. We may have had a part in the verbal exchange over the course of a minute or over the course of ten years. We may have been able to answer some key questions or even used the scriptures that turned the light on for a person. But that is where our job stops. In fact, that's as far as we can go. No matter how much we love a person or want that person in the kingdom, the next step is revelation from God. And at that point we are totally helpless. As Jesus told Peter when Peter confessed that He was the Christ, "flesh and blood did not reveal that to you Peter."

Revelation. Don't miss that. No one reasons or can be reasoned into the Kingdom of God. That is the difference

between Christianity and any other religion. Christianity is entrance by faith into the revelation that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. And no one but the Holy Spirit can put that light on or connect that divine dot.

Now I don't know about you, but that frees me up! That tells me that I am not responsible, nor am I accountable for the results when I share my faith.

I am, however, accountable for what I do with the many opportunities that God gives me regarding the sharing of my faith. And responding to those opportunities are what Ambushed by God is all about.

Spiritual Opportunities

As you read this book, you may be tempted to think, "Kelly Talamo has so many opportunities to share Christ. I wish I'd get those opportunities." Don't even think it! I don't believe that I have any more opportunities than you or anyone else. All I've done is look intently to identify opportunities when they presented themselves. We're more apt to find what we intently look for.

Let me illustrate. Have you ever reflected on a conversation with someone at work, on the street, or even with a family member and you thought to yourself, "I should have said _____." or "What I could have said there was_____"

Now, did you ever wonder what that little discussion really is? It's my belief that it was the identification of a spiritual opportunity in the rear-view mirror.

Now don't feel bad. Everyone's had that happen at least once and most have had it happen dozens of times. But do you

want to view all of your spiritual opportunities in the rear view mirror? That's spiritual frustration!

Wouldn't it be better to view spiritual opportunities as they unfold before, identify them as such, and lock into God's next move as it's happening? Now we're talking divine excitement!

I can assure you that as you get a grasp on how this works, every day of your life has the potential to become a spiritual adventure to what would have been just another ordinary day.

Mindset over Methods

In a society that thrives on quick solutions let me assure you that what I'm about to share with you is not a technique, method or a how-to guide to sharing that'll get you instant results. What I will share with you is a process called a ministry mindset.

A ministry mindset really encompasses all of life. It's a place in your mind where there's no division between sacred and secular and has at its centre, Jesus Christ and Him crucified. It will permeate every corner of your life so that you walk about "not as unwise but as wise (which allows you to) make the most of your time because the days are evil".

A ministry mindset has some added benefits. It allows you to have an absolute blast and be dead serious - simultaneously! It causes you to walk the edge between being personally proactive and sensitive to leading of the Spirit. That biblical tension will keep you in a place of dependence which then increases your faith, which is the only thing that pleases God.

The ministry mindset that I've developed over thirty years as a Christian was not my idea. It came by surrounding myself

with men of God and spending time in the Word of God. And let me add, there is no substitute for either component.

Keeping it Fresh

No one would deny that it's a battle out there so in order to stay alert and keep my thinking fresh I developed an acrostic called S.O.S. This little tool enables me to check myself and helps me keep the focus of a ministry mindset.

When ships are in trouble at sea they send out an S.O.S., which means Save Our Ship, or Save Our Souls. I believe people send that same message every single day.

In general people are fairly cognizant of the fact that the ship of their life could sink at any time. Maybe it's their family or their career. Perhaps it's their finances or their health. But since God put "eternity in their hearts", sooner or later most people come to the realization that all is not well in the depths of their souls. And when they do, they send out an S.O.S.

Sometimes the signal they send is subtle. Other times it's loud and clear. Our job as believers is to be sensitive to who is signalling for help. And that can only be done through the sensitivity of the Holy Spirit.

It is in that thinking that I find the roots of my acrostic S.O.S. The letters stand for Spirit Filled, Opportunity Sensitive, and Spiritually Prepared.

Let's examine them individually and allow me to share with you how they connect beautifully to form and maintain a ministry mindset.

Spirit-Filled

In order to see or sense anything spiritually a person must first be "filled with the Spirit". Being filled with the spirit is neither a suggestion nor an option. It's a clear biblical command. If you want to participate in spiritual activity you must choose to surrender yourself and your agenda to the one who controls all of life.

Spiritual opportunities that take place here on earth (the physical dimension) are really in the heavenlies (the spiritual dimension). So you must be operating with the eyes of faith in order to see spiritual opportunities as they occur.

That is what I believe the Apostle Paul is trying to communicate to the Ephesians when he prays that the "eyes of your hearts may be enlightened". Do hearts have eyes? Perhaps not like we imagine but certainly as God sees it. We must elevate our thinking and seeing into the spiritual dimension; where spiritual action takes place. And you only see it when you're Spirit-filled on a moment-by-moment basis.

Basically the words "be filled" mean "to be carried along by". When a person is filled they are no longer in control. They are not carrying or directing anything. How appropriate when you put it in the context of sharing our faith. We are not "carrying or controlling the meeting, the encounter, or the conversation". It is the Spirit who does that part. Our job is simply to participate in what He's doing

Opportunity Sensitive

Being filled with the Holy Spirit gives us the unique ability to sense a spiritual opportunity as it unfolds before us. Sharing

our faith is not schedule-driven, it's Spirit-driven. You can pray for opportunities as Paul tells us in Colossians, but you can't plan on them. Being filled however makes me alert to spiritual opportunities as they play out before me in real time.

Personally speaking I miss opportunities simply because I'm not looking for them. Why am I not looking for them? Because I'm not filled with the Spirit. And let me add, when I'm not full of the Spirit, I'm full of something else - usually myself. And frankly I don't care who's saved. Only Jesus does! So being Spirit-filled simply a prerequisite for sensing spiritual opportunities.

Opportunities are recognized by simple observation. You can see one coming by watching the eyes of a person as they speak or by noticing the lack of eye contact when a certain subject is brought up. When you think about it, we're as spiritually sensitive as we are Spirit-filled. Ouch! But the beautiful part is the fact that being filled avails us to the endless ways which to pick up on the needs of people. The sanctification of our senses opens up a whole new world of spiritual opportunities.

Spiritually Prepared

Having picked up on spiritual opportunities unfolding before us, we now need to know what to do with them. What do we say? How do we handle questions, objections, ridicule, or the variety of needs that surface in everyday life? The answer is we handle it by being spiritually prepared, by spending time in the Word of God in order to know what God has to say about certain situations. Being spiritually prepared does not mean that we have all the answers. That'll never happen. It means

however that we're ready with the Word of God to "give an account for the hope that is in us".

This is the step that requires discipline. And discipline is where most Christians drop the ball. Think about it. We know what the world says, we know what the news says, we know what the preacher says and we may even know what Dr. Phil says. But none of that knowledge equates to spiritual preparation. Spiritually prepared comes by knowing what God says in His most precious word.

The Power of the Word

There are two things to note here. First, the impact of the Spirit of God comes when you connect His Word to your conversation. Listen carefully. "The entrance of thy word gives light. It [the word] gives understanding to the simple" (Psalm 119:130). "The law of the Lord is perfect; restoring the soul" (Psalm 19:7).

If anything is going to click spiritually, (in us or another person) it'll be because of the Word of God. The law (or Word) of God is so perfect that it has the capacity to restore or regenerate a soul! What a word! We can't neglect it.

It doesn't matter if you use friendship evangelism, helpful tracts, or a few simple questions. The real impact of your message will be directly related to the Word of God and how He chooses to use it. Whatever your strategy, whatever your method, it must be accompanied by the Word of God. It's what will bring power to your words and your testimony.

Second, something very wonderful happens when you are getting spiritually prepared. You get Spirit-filled. Get

it? Time in the Word of God changes you! Our thinking is shaped, our knowledge expanded, and our character is deepened.

We change when we are in the Word of God. We find out that He's God and we're not. We get a different view of God and a realistic view ourselves. That view allows us to confess, repent, adjust, and praise. We then come away Spirit-filled, looking for opportunities and ready to give an account for the hope that is in us to those who have been drawn to Him by our lives. That's the S.O.S. process. That's a ministry mindset. That's His divine Ambush as I see it.

The following stories are real-life illustrations of a ministry mindset in action. As you'll see they are not all success stories. By "success" I mean not everyone I share with comes to Christ. Not even close. In fact you'll notice that I seldom do it perfectly. Sometimes that's funny and other times it's tragic.

Although the stories are not all success stories, I do consider them to be successful. To me, successful means being faithful to the opportunities that God gave me at the time. Even when I did it wrong, it's successful in that God used the encounter to adjust my thinking. I learned something in it. And maybe that's what the encounter was really all about in the first place.

Finally, these are only my stories and my stories are not the point. The point is that you have a story. Everyone has a story. Every day we play to a packed house. And hidden inside the situations at work, home, or with family are spiritual opportunities God's divinely arranged especially for you. And think of this. The best stories haven't even happened yet!

The question is, are you willing to become bait in God's divine trap? Are you willing to be the lure into the box canyon

so that God can open up the life of His Son through you? Are you willing to be a player in His divine Ambush? The very fact that you picked up this book says that you just might be.

The sharing of your faith is simply your relationship with God - gone public. The ways your life with God can go public are endless. So are the ways He draws people to Himself. I trust that these stories will encourage you to go public with your relationship with God. And then relax and leave the results to the only one who can control them. The Spirit of the living God.

Discussion Questions

Chapter 1 – Living Life With A Ministry Mindset

1. Describe a Ministry Mindset in your own words.
2. Is having a Ministry Mindset a new concept for you?
3. Can you give a biblical reference that supports a Ministry Mindset?
4. What are some things that God uses to draw people to Himself?
5. Complete: To me, evangelism is _____.
6. Kelly talks about the S.O.S. principle. How do you think you could apply this in your everyday life?
7. How is a Ministry Mindset developed?

chapter 2

hand signals

It was an extremely cold and nasty day. A light, steady drizzle made it the kind of day where you don't want to go out. For me it was the kind of day I like to build a fire in the wood stove, start a pot of Creole gumbo, and dive into a good book.

But not today. Today I had to go out. There was no way around it – and believe me I looked for one.

We live in a rapidly growing area where road crews are constantly at work trying to manage the ongoing traffic chaos caused by construction. Less than a mile from my home I use a busy two-lane road that leads to the freeway. Usually the traffic moves but on this particular morning I was greeted by an annoying sign that read "Construction Ahead Prepare To Stop". Workers in the construction area were resurfacing and allowing

only one lane of traffic to proceed at a time.

As I approached the construction area, I could see a flagman holding a reversible sign that read "Slow" (in orange), or "Stop" (in red). You've seen them. You've waited too.

When I was stopped, I found myself first in a long line of vehicles with about a five-minute wait while the oncoming lane proceeded. Waiting with a fair amount of patience I slowly began scanning the work crew around me. As I did my attention fell upon the man holding the reversible sign. His job was simple. Every five minutes, turn the sign around from "Slow" to "Stop". Five minutes later, turn it back again. Except for the fact that he was obviously cold, the man was fairly expressionless and as I watched him a little more intently, my curiosity was piqued, and some questions came to mind.

What was this guy really like beneath his passive expression? Is he happy? Does he like his job? How long has he done this? Does he have a family? How many of the thousands of people that pass him every day really even notice him?

I didn't have any answers mind you. I only had a bunch of questions.

As I began to study the man I noticed his clothes very were well worn. His hat was old and frayed and it was obvious it had been wet before. His face and hands were weathered. And suddenly I found myself caring about a guy I didn't even know.

My response surprised me, and I decided to see if I could find some answers. So I began to pray. Nothing big, simply: "Lord, you know this guy. You created him. What's he like? He doesn't appear to like what he is doing. He looks lonely. I wouldn't like that job. It looks boring. Lord, would you like to reach this guy?"

My own question caught me off guard. Reach him? What are you talking about? You can't even talk to him.

But as I waited (and listened) I began to get excited. I sensed the question might not be so crazy. So I followed up with, "Lord, let's do it. Let's reach this guy!"

The prayer just came out of my mind and I trusted it was Spirit-led. I continued: "Lord, you are the creator of the universe. Nothing is impossible for you. Will you create a way for me to share with this man without my even saying a word? I have complete confidence that you can do that. In Jesus' name. Amen."

As I finished, I sensed that God was going to do something. I hadn't a clue as to what, but I felt He would.

Being first in line, I had a great view. The "sign man" and I were only separated by about nine metres. As I waited I continued to watch him for about another minute having no idea of what to expect.

Suddenly, the man looked over toward my car and we made unmistakable eye contact. He noticed I'd been looking at him. Without hesitation – and without really considering what I was doing – I took my left hand off the steering wheel, stuck it out the window, and gently pointed my index finger toward the sky.

That got his attention. With a slightly puzzled look, he leaned a little toward me. Again, I slowly pointed my index finger toward the sky and this time, I shifted my gaze upward. He too looked up at the sky and then back toward me. He was intrigued. I smiled and pointed again. Again he looked up and then looked at me and put his hand out, palm up, as if to say, "What are you looking at?"

Just then, he realised that it was time to change the sign.

He turned it around so that the "Slow" side showed in my direction. I obeyed and moved ahead slowly.

As I approached the man watched me intently. When we were right next to each other I again pointed up with expectancy on my face. He glanced up, and then looked quickly back to me, as if to say, "What in the world are you talking about?"

Passing alongside him, I simply smiled but the man's face drew a blank.

As I proceeded down the road and reviewed the encounter, I began to chuckle. Wow! We made contact without saying a word. I then went right to the Lord. "Lord, you did that but I know this can't be all there is. What's coming next?"

As I proceeded to take care of my business that encounter never left my mind. I knew I'd be passing the site on the way home and I couldn't wait to see what would happen next. As I began to visualise the possibilities, I felt that in order for me to make contact again I would have to be stopped at the front of the line.

The procedure was to stop cars for five minutes in each direction. But because the traffic was so congested, you could be first, as I was this morning, or you could be number 60. It all depends on how you hit it. Being number 60 wouldn't get it. I had to be close to the front. So I prayed again: "Okay, Lord, if we're onto something here, please allow me to be stopped first again. I know you love this man and I sense you're setting this up. I look forward to what you are going to do. In Jesus' name. Amen."

God always answers prayer. But not always the way we usually expect.

This time, I was stopped about ten cars from the front. Close enough to see the sign man, but not close enough to get his attention the way I had earlier.

It had been about three hours since that first encounter and I was curious to see if the guy would even remember me. But being tenth in line it was obvious that he wouldn't see me until I passed right by him.

At first I was disappointed at my line position, but I trusted God had something cooking even if I couldn't quite understand it. So I adjusted my attitude and continued to watch with expectancy. And as the line began to move, I hoped and prayed we would have a chance for some eye contact. We did.

As I slowly approached, he saw me and recognised me. Our eyes connected once more. As I drew near, I again simply pointed upward. He looked up and then quickly at me as if to say again, "What are you talking about?"

Nearing his side with the window rolled down, I simply asked him, "Look up there. Can you see it?"

He quickly looked up as I passed. It happened in a second and there was no way for me to stop; so I glanced at him in the rear view mirror only to see him still looking up in total confusion.

I proceeded home with that scene fresh in my mind and wondering where all of this was leading. The second encounter had not been what I had pictured, but in a way it was better. The element of surprise was there and he was obviously interested in seeing whatever it was I was pointing to. I wondered, Will I ever see this guy again? And if I do, what signals will we exchange the next time?

The very next day I headed along the same road on my

way to an appointment. As I expected they weren't finished with the construction so I realised I just might get another opportunity to see my new acquaintance.

There was no rain today but it was as cold as the day before. As I approached the area, the inevitable sign confirmed my expectations: "Construction Ahead Prepare To Stop". But today was different. Today the sign was not an intrusion. Today it was an opportunity. So I prayed without hesitation, "Lord put me first in line." It was that simple.

I was close. This time I was second and second turned out to be just fine. I had no idea what I would do if we made eye contact again. I didn't have a plan. This was a fly-by-the-seat-of-your-spiritual-pants activity, and I wasn't about to spoil everything with my inadequate human scheming. Honestly it didn't matter. I didn't have time to think about what I should do. In less than a minute the "sign man" saw me. And yes, he remembered.

As we made eye contact, I wondered if I should point toward heaven again. I didn't. I simply smiled at him and this time lifted only my eyes upward. He returned my smile.

Then he surprised me by walking toward my car. He couldn't leave his post, but he wanted to make verbal contact so I beat him to it. I rolled my window down and shouted out, "Do you like coffee?"

With a big smile he shouted back, "Yes".

"I'll bring you some," I returned.

He gave me a thumbs-up and went back to his position. We exchanged smiles as I rode past and the two of us waved. There was no need to say a word. We both understood the signals.

Attending to business, I was back in two hours with coffee

in hand. Once more I prayed that the exchange would go well. I was about fifth in line this time and almost out of his eyesight. In fact, he didn't see me until cars began to move.

Upon making eye contact, I lightly tooted the horn and slowly held up the hot cup of coffee. His simple smile told me he was into this kind of service. I doubt that it had ever happened before.

As he looked over again, I pointed up. His smile grew larger as I slowly crept forward. Soon I would be next to him.

He planted himself in the middle of the road and reached for his coffee. As I paused momentarily to hand it to him I realised I would only have a second.

"Here you go, I hope you enjoy this," I quickly stated.

"Thanks a lot, man," he said. "This is right on time".

"Do you see it?" I asked

"See what, man?" he boomed back.

"Jesus. Do you see? It's all about Jesus."

The guy didn't know what to say. But if I was reading his expression correctly – and I think I was – his expression said, "No, help me see".

Beginning to roll forward again, I quickly asked him, "Would you read something if I brought it to you?"

"Yeah, man, bring it on," he answered as I pulled away.

"I'll bring you something later today." And off I went.

Later that afternoon, I arrived with a couple of simple handouts that explained God's steps to salvation and talked about the meaning of life. I was third in line on this trip. He spotted me immediately, and the exchange went smoothly. I simply rolled down my window, and handing him the pamphlets I said, "These will help you to see what I have been

pointing to. Give them a good look."

He said, "You got it, man." Stuffing the material into his worn jacket pocket the man continued to smile.

It was two or three days before I returned to the construction site. I thought the construction would have been over by that time, but it wasn't. And unlike other drivers, I was glad. This time I was stopped at about the number seven position.

Looking ahead, I could see my new friend, looking much the same as he had on the other encounters. Nothing on the outside had changed and I had no idea if anything had occurred on the inside.

I watched him for a full five minutes and couldn't pick up any signals. Yet even though I didn't know if anything had happened with him, I was full of joy because somehow in this wild process - I had changed. I had a deeper appreciation for one very simple man doing his job on the side of the road. I had also witnessed and been a part of the awesome creativity of God, who had created an opportunity out of a perceived obstacle – a divine ambush out of an annoying delay.

With less than thirty seconds of contact, a cup of hot coffee and some prayer, God had created a way for His Son to be shared with a man on the side of the road.

Soon, the sign changed and slowly I approached him. He saw me coming about 12 metres away. When he did, he smiled and slowly made a very simple gesture. He pointed his index finger toward the sky.

Hand signals. They're everywhere.

Discussion Questions

Chapter 2 – Hand Signals

1. What was your first reaction to this story? Does this story stretch your perspective about what God is capable of doing?
2. What part do you think prayer played in this story?
3. What does this story tell you about the creativity of God when applied to sharing your faith?
4. Should we be looking to share our faith with every road-side flagman?
5. According to Ephesians 2:10, for whom is the flagman working?

chapter 3

where's Leon?

Landscaping for a living is a lot like any other business. There are things you love and things, well, you just tolerate. One of those tolerated items is the installation of culvert pipes, or what we simply call "culverts".

Culverts are pipes that enable you to span a ditch or a low spot in order to gain access from the road to your new work site. The driveway material is then poured over the culvert and drainage can proceed unhindered.

Culverts aren't pretty but they are necessary and also have a promising side. The promising side of installing a culvert is that in three short months there will be a home waiting to be landscaped at that very site.

I purchased my culverts from a man named Big Jim. Big

Jim owned a mobile-home lot and on the backside of the lot he sold culverts.

I was never really fond of stopping at Jim's. He was either in the back of his office eating or on the phone gabbing away. And even though there was rarely anyone ahead of you, you always had to wait. Big Jim didn't move too quickly when you drove up. In fact, his whole operation seemed to be stuck in slow motion.

Big Jim would always greet you with a flat, "How are ya?" line but you knew he really didn't want you to answer his question. His greeting was simply a ritualised recognition of your presence and you rarely felt welcomed by Big Jim.

In the four years I bought culverts, Big Jim rarely helped me load one. After my purchase he would usually lean his rotund body on the counter and say the exact same thing, "Drive around back. Leon will load you."

Leon. Now there's another unappetising character. There was a particular reason that kept me from getting excited about working with Leon, who was about 50 years old, thin as a rail and distinctively aromatic. The hot Louisiana summers kept all of us sweating, but Leon's sweat was at another level. He had a special stale smell that was a three-way mix of hard work, hot sun, and Jack Daniels.

Leon rarely looked clean and even when he was, his thin frail hands would shake whenever he reached for a tool. At times he seemed so weak I wondered if he would drop a culvert on my toe as we wrestled them up on the truck.

Leon's eyes carried a glazed-over look and whenever I approached, he would always be sitting down staring off into space. I often felt bad about disturbing him but if I wanted my

truck to get loaded, I had to rouse him up and give him a hand.

Please understand that it wasn't helping him that bothered me. My problem with Leon was that I just didn't like him. To put it mildly, Leon was an added attraction to my day that I felt I could do without.

One particularly hot day, Leon looked and smelled worse than ever. In fact, I wondered if he was even going to make it. The guy appeared extremely weak and had to pause to cough quite a few times. After loading three 18-footer culverts, and coughing deeply, Leon slumped down on the gravel driveway.

"What's wrong Leon?" I asked, not really caring that much. "Are you sick?"

"No, just tired as hell," he answered

Leon didn't usually have much to say, and what he said was rarely encouraging. It was obvious he didn't enjoy life and I sensed that Leon was a very lonely guy. Add to that, his relationship with Big Jim was not the greatest. Leon appeared to be a very used, broken, and depressed man. All in all, it wasn't fun to be around Leon.

As I drove away that afternoon, a still, small voice started whispering in my ear. I'd known Leon for almost a year, but suddenly I realised, I didn't really know him at all. Funny how that is. You get to know people you try to get to know!

Part of the reason I didn't go out of my way to cultivate a relationship with Leon was that I didn't see anything in the relationship for me. You see, Leon didn't really serve me, at least, not in the way that I wanted to be served. He wasn't one of my valued employees. He didn't do a thing to increase my business. He didn't offer any good fellowship or a positive word that might energize my day. No, all Leon did was stand in the

hot Louisiana sun and force me to help him load culverts that he and his organisation should have been loading for me. What good was he?

As such questions ran through my mind, another force was at work in my heart. Another voice was whispering to me about Leon. Soon I realised I was getting a message from God's Spirit. So I asked, "Lord, what's going on with Leon?"

Don't ask questions of that still small voice if you really don't want the answer. You might just get it. Soon after I asked, I began to see Leon in a much different light.

First, I saw Leon's need for Jesus Christ. That was the easy one. Jesus was already my friend, and I knew from past experience that He wanted to extend His circle of friendship to others – through me, if possible.

But the second thing about Leon was what really got me. I saw my need to view Leon from God's perspective.

Almost immediately, I began to wonder what God could do for Leon and not worry about what Leon could do for me. At that very moment, as I sat there in my truck, I felt compassion for Leon. As the Holy Spirit softened my heart, more detailed questions began to surface.

Why was Leon winding down his life on the back side of a culvert lot? Where was his family? Where were his friends? Did he even have a family? Or friends?

I also began to compare Leon's condition with my own – and other questions arose. Why was I more blessed with the material things of life? Why was I stronger and healthier and able to high-step through life with more energy and strength?

The only answer is the grace of God. I couldn't take credit for any of it. I hadn't done a thing to deserve what I had. Yet

maybe I could do something to help Leon, to share with him some of the blessings that had been bestowed upon me.

There is something very powerful about a moment of conviction. You find yourself both devastated and delighted at the reality of what was just revealed. You realise you've fallen short but you also know you're being given a special opportunity to overcome failure and perhaps make a difference in another person's life.

I resolved at that moment that I would take an active role in loving Leon. I had always been reasonably nice but I'd never really loved him. I never sought his highest good. And isn't that what love really is?

My next visit to Big Jim's began as usual. Leon and I loaded two culverts and it was obvious he was a little shaky from the night before. As we finished our job I approached him gently.

"Leon, are you married?"

"No," he answered. "I was. My wife left me a long time ago."

"Any kids?" I asked

"Yeah, got a couple."

"Do you see them a lot?"

"Yeah. My daughter comes to see me. We live pretty close to one another."

I watched carefully as sadness came over him while he mentioned his family.

"What is it, Leon?" I asked.

"I don't know," he said. "You know, life is really tough at times. You work hard all your life, but at the end you ain't got nothing, and you ain't got nobody."

The words echoed in my ears: "At the end, you ain't got nothing, and you ain't got nobody."

My mind was full. On the one hand, I could understand why everyone would run from Leon. I had. Maybe he let down everyone he knew or cared about at one time or another.

And yet, the thought of he being alone made me cringe inside. Leon probably hated being alone with no one to turn to. Perhaps that's why the bottle was such a constant companion.

"Leon, have you ever considered what Jesus Christ could do for you?"

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Jesus understands where you are right now. He can fill those empty spots in your life with love and understanding. Would you mind if I share something with you?"

"Sure, go ahead" he answered.

For the next few minutes, on a metal culvert in the hot Louisiana sun, I sat closer to Leon that I have ever had before. And for the first time ever, I considered his bodily smell as a sign of need, instead of my cue to leave.

Slowly, I walked him through four or five short Bible verses that had been printed on a paper I handed to him. The last, John 1:12, was an invitation for Leon to become a member of the family of God by receiving Christ into his life.

When we had finished, I asked Leon if he would take some time later that night to go through the verses again. I told him that, if he felt he was ready, he could get on his knees and invite Christ into his life.

He assured me he would read the verses again and think it over. With a simple "thank you," he then placed the paper in his sweaty upper pocket.

With Leon's smell still lingering in my nostrils, I drove

away. Only this time, instead of being annoyed or put out, I felt thankful and at peace.

The need for culverts comes in spells. Some weeks you might install two or three. Then you may go a month or two before you needed another.

It was about six or seven weeks before I returned to Big Jim's, and for the first time ever, I was actually looking forward to the trip.

Big Jim greeted me with his usual uninterested, "How are you today?"

"Fine, fine." I said.

"So whatcha need, young fella?"

"Just one 16-footer today, Jim."

He wrote up my ticket quickly. And heading towards the door I said, "Thanks a lot, Jim. I'll pull around the back. Is Leon back there?"

"Leon? Oh, you don't know? Leon's dead," he replied without hesitation. "His sister found him dead in his living room about three weeks ago. Must have been a heart attack or something. We really don't know. Ain't that something? Don't worry, I'll get you loaded up," he finished.

For twenty motionless seconds, I just stood there. I don't remember saying a word. I just turned slowly towards the door in a slight state of shock. But as I neared the door, Big Jim's loud mouth stopped me in my tracks. "Funny thing about Leon, though. The two weeks before he died he was like a different person."

That got my attention.

"What do you mean, Jim?" I asked turning towards him.

"Well for one thing, he was as sober as can be. He smiled a lot, and he was here on time every single day. I don't know what the hell got into him. He was better than he's ever been…and then, poof, he dies. You just never know, do you?"

"No, you don't," I thought, as I moved slowly out the door and towards my truck. No, never ever know!"

As I slid behind the wheel of my truck and switched on the ignition, I didn't try to figure it out. But what I did do was I paused for a moment to thank God for the voice of the Holy Spirit and the need for something as simple as culverts.

Discussion Questions

Chapter 3 – Where's Leon?

1. What struck you most about this story? Do you personally know a "Leon"?
2. Do you think we naturally like to share with people who are like us?
3. What did you learn about God from this story?
4. What principles of communication or relationship building did you see in operation here?
5. With people like Leon we tend to think, "Lucky for them we came along." But according to Romans 1:13-14, what's God's view about that?
6. What is God thinking in James 2:1-5?

chapter 4

"get back in your car, pal!"

The night seemed pleasant and peaceful enough as I drove through the Louisiana town called Abita Springs. Abita Springs was usually out of my way so I didn't pass through there much. But that evening I had taken a scenic side route that brought me right through the heart of quaint little village.

What made the town special was a deep artesian well situated right in the middle of the town square where visitors and residents could fill their water jugs. It's been active for over a hundred years. There's no charge and no hassle.

Traffic was rare in Abita Springs and no one seems to be in a hurry. In many ways, the place appeared to have been lifted from a painting of some sleepy nineteenth-century European hamlet. I guess Abita Spring had policemen but I'd never seen one.

Now let's be clear. I really don't drive fast, especially in a strange place, but I'm not the slowest driver either. I kind of ride the fence, looking for that line of grace between what the limit is and what the law may allow. You know what I mean: Will they allow me five or ten miles over the speed limit? Where's the edge?

Well that night in Abita Springs, I found it. The posted limit was 35 miles per hour and the line of grace stopped abruptly at 36.

As I entered the town limits I was feeling "spiritually sound." I had just served the Lord by leading a Bible study that I felt had gone rather well. Now I was passing through an idyllic painting of a village on the way to my own personal post-card scene at home where I would find a lovely wife, a country cottage, and three energetic toddlers who celebrated my every entrance.

All seemed right with my world – until I heard the sickening sound of that siren coupled with the sight of those unexpected and unnerving flashing blue lights in my rear view mirror.

You know the feeling. At first you're frightened as you ponder: What's wrong? Was there a robbery? A car-jacking? A killer on the loose? Then fright is compounded with anxiety as you suddenly realise you're the one who's being pulled over.

"No way," I thought, as I gave a quick glance at the speedometer. I am barely going 40 miles an hour. It must have been something else. Perhaps they're just doing a license check. Maybe I lost a hubcap. Countless thoughts flooded my mind as I nervously looked for a spot to pull over. (Pulling over gracefully can win some points, you know.)

In a flash I was out of my car and was greeted by two very young men in blue who were quickly getting out of their patrol car. The driver and the officer in charge came close to my face and gruffly demanded my license.

Taking it quickly, he barked, "What's the hurry?"

Hurry? I wondered why he would think I was in a hurry.

"Well I wasn't in a hurry," I defended. "I was just returning from teaching Bible study and I…"

The words "Bible study" didn't make a dent. He abruptly cut me off.

"You were speeding," he growled.

"I was?" I replied in surprise.

"That's right," he continued, as he fastened my license to his clipboard.

There was no expression on his face or hesitation in his movements. He was only interested in the hard cold facts. Now I've been pulled over enough to know what happens when the license is fastened to the clipboard. It's ticket time.

If I had been in the Spirit until then, my walk in the Spirit ended the moment that spring-loaded clip snapped firmly against my license. God was suddenly out of the picture. Now, it was just between me and this cop.

I can't believe this! I thought. I looked over at the second officer (perhaps for a sign of mercy) only to notice his name on the badge and the word "TRAINEE" directly under it.

Now I got the real picture. This young trainee was being schooled in the fine art of ticketing. And tonight, I was the curriculum. Welcome to Traffic Violation 101 in Abita Springs.

Before I could begin my defence, the officer in charge

looked me right in the eye and rattled off his well-rehearsed message: "Sir, you were going 40 in a 35 and we are going to have to write you up. Please wait in the car until we tell you otherwise."

The tone in his voice indicated that he was finished speaking. There was no room for negotiation.

Slumping into my seat, I glanced at my Bible and began to wonder how this could be happening. What a supreme bummer! Here I am, not only minding my own business, but actually attending to God's business, and I walk right onto the set of Walking Tall. This must be a bad dream.

A ticket! And not just any ticket, a speeding ticket! That's a fine, points on my driving record, and (oh yeah) let's not forget the insurance company. They'll want their cut come premium time. No, this isn't a bad dream, it's a bad comedy! Forty in a 35! Are you serious? No one gets a ticket for 40 in a 35. No one!

Worse than that, no one gives a ticket for 40 in a 35. No one, that is, except this guy!

"I'm going to have to write you up."

Those words rang in my mind over and over as I sat there tapping my Bible with my right hand. Have to write me up? Have to write me up? Why does he have to write me up? Whose rule was that?

With my racing thoughts came intense irritation, and with irritation came a bad decision. "The guy is an idiot! Doesn't he have anything else to do? I began to answer my own questions. Why, take a look Kelly. You've been sitting here for over 10 minutes and you haven't even seen another car have you? You're the biggest trouble Abita Springs has had in six months. Wake up! You are the negative illustration this guy has been

waiting for all night. No one can train without a subject. And tonight, you're it!

This conversation with myself went on for five more minutes as I watched my new acquaintances do their thing in the rear view mirror. They covered all the bases. Computer license check, stolen car check, insurance check, and finally, the ticket itself.

Hot and getting hotter, and with nothing left to do, my enlightened heart turned sour.

"This guy doesn't have a compassionate bone in his body," I thought. "Well. I guess not. He's lost. What do you expect from lost people? Why, he didn't even flinch when you said 'Bible study'. You could have said mud wrestling and it would have received the same reaction. No, this guy is not only lost, he's very lost. He's cold and hard, and deep down he probably hates Christians."

The more I talked to myself, the madder I became. Finally, I decided that something had to be done. No man of God could just sit there and take this. But what could I do? I couldn't get violent. God wouldn't like that. Besides, that would only make things worse. But I had to do something.

Continuing to tap my Bible, I made my fateful (and worse) decision of the night. "I know what I'll do," I thought. "I'll share Christ with him! I'm going for the jugular. He'll never know what hit him. That's it. I'll expose his heart in front of his own trainee. I'm going to take this guy to Bible school in Jesus' name. A little razor-sharp slice of the gospel and this guy will think twice about writing up a 40 in a 35 again. Yeah, that's it. That's what I'll do!"

Just about the time I made that momentous decision, I noticed the officers getting out of their car and heading my way.

As they paused at the rear of my car, I decided to make my move. Quickly I bounded out of my car. Then standing tall in the glare of my own tail-lights, I began my onslaught.

"Officer," I began, "I've got a question for you. What's God doing in your life?"

Somewhat startled, he just stared at me.

I continued: "What are you doing personally to prepare for eternity?"

Without a pause he pointed at me. "Pal, I didn't ask you to get out of the car. If you don't get your _____ back in your seat, you're going to find out real quick just what God is doing in my life."

Shot down and blasted. Crashed and burning. Words can't really describe it. The damage was done in 15 seconds. How could this have happened? And the man hadn't flinched at my show of righteousness.

Slumping deeply in my seat, I watched as the two of them hovered over my license plate a few more minutes. Then God picked up where the officer left off.

Speaking a little more gently, the Lord said: "Kelly, Kelly, what are you doing? My Word is indeed the sword of the Spirit but not a weapon to cut people up. I can't bless motives like yours. That was totally out of my character. You were wrong. You didn't have that officer's best interests at heart and you didn't care for him as a person.

"You were out to cut him down, not build him up. My Word works in love, not revenge. You were wrong when you went over the speed limit and your reaction to being stopped was equally wrong. Where's your humility?"

I could only bow my head and let my Father have His

way in my heart. I learned a hard lesson that night as I sat there waiting for those cops to finish their business – a lesson I probably won't forget for a while. The Lord is much more concerned with my ability to display His character than with my boldness in standing up for my rights.

I signed the ticket and paid the fine.

Discussion Questions

Chapter 4 – "Get Back in Your Car, Pal!"

1. Can you ever remember sharing Christ with a bad motive?
2. What kind of response to this situation would have been a better witness for Jesus Christ?
3. What does 1 Corinthians 3:1-7 tell us might happen to Kelly because of this one?
4. If the policeman never comes to faith in Christ, is Kelly responsible for that?
5. What does Romans 13:1-2 tell us about the speed limit?

chapter 5

first contact

"Now those were the good old days."

Ever heard that or perhaps even said it yourself? But what does it mean? Were they days devoid of all worry or trouble; days that were totally carefree? Or were they perhaps just average days, or even bad days, that we've somehow turned into the "good old days" through the distorted lens of time?

For me and many of my friends, the good old days were spelled "L. S. U." – Louisiana State University. Four years of lounging, loving, laughter, and a little learning along the way.

Our ultimate mission in life was the successful juggling of freedom, academics, dates and athletics. There were the hot co-eds, the cramming and crashing between road trips and visits home, and frequent bull sessions we labelled searching for the

meaning of life. Four high-speed, non-stop, activity-filled years.

But despite the fun and all the excitement I knew something was missing – and that something ambushed me out of nowhere one crisp, autumn night.

Cruising campus on my beloved ten-speed, I was feeling the wind and dreaming some dreams, with legwork and scenery my main agenda. Having just aced a world-history mid-term, I felt I'd earned at least an hour's vacation. This ride was my treat to myself and no one could spoil it. But even as the cool, autumn evening was whispering freedom, I heard other voices calling in the distance.

Approaching our newly completed assembly centre, I saw from the parked cars that a large crowd was inside. I was puzzled as to why. As far as I knew, nothing was scheduled. Because I was pretty much in tune with anything that even remotely resembled a concert, I was confident that there wasn't any rock group on the docket.

Since it was just past 10:00 pm on a weeknight, I knew that whatever was happening was almost over. But my desire for a break, combined with a healthy dose of natural curiosity, made me decide to park my bike and try to catch the end of the mystery event.

As God would have it, the end was all I needed. My definition of freedom was about to be seriously challenged. If heaven chuckles at the actions of humanity, that night I provided a complete comedy show.

Like a stray duck seeking rest in a hunting preserve, I slowly made my way into the crowded assembly. Seeking to remain unnoticed, I found a seat secluded from the group and for a moment enjoyed my solo view of this obviously different crowd.

Little did I know that I had walked right into the climax of an outreach rally being conducted by the evangelistic organisation called Campus Crusade for Christ.

The featured speaker for the evening was Christian apologist Josh McDowell. And as sovereignty would have it I entered precisely as Josh was about to do his thing.

I quickly learned that I had encountered a skilled spiritual marksman, armed and dangerous. If I lacked a clear agenda that crisp autumn night, it was obvious Josh didn't. Sitting so far away from the stage, I felt safe at first, but before long I found I had become a rather easy target. Josh had me perfectly in his sights, with words from both Testaments aimed directly at the centre of my heart. In fact, I was so vulnerable it almost seemed as though the place emptied as he spoke. The only people in the building were Josh and me.

Loaded with love and filled with passion, Josh let it fly. He came with story after story about who Jesus was and why I needed Him in my life. Systematically arranged and creatively packaged, his message hit me squarely in the gut.

Josh's well-crafted words made the speech instructor I had been listening to that afternoon seem like a dead man. This guy's good, I thought. He's really got me thinking. And if I'm not careful, I may do something stupid.

At the end of the meeting, as he was winding up his presentation, I regained some control. "Okay, maybe Josh was a sharp verbal marksman," I decided. "But, he wouldn't get me." Sure, I was a little disconcerted by the Gospel grenades he had tossed in my direction. I had even considered (briefly) walking up to the front of the auditorium when he had first given an invitation at the end to come forward.

That's when I realised I was about to lose it. I knew I had to get out of there fast. It was even a little embarrassing that I had almost fallen for his pitch. "I should know better," I thought!

Pointing my slightly bruised ego toward the back door and moving under the cover of the alter call I headed for my beloved ten-speed. Then I quietly slipped into the cool night air, careful to elude any pursuing crusaders. Despite feeling confused and unsettled, I mounted my bike, recovered my equilibrium and began to weave my way through the moonlit campus.

Speeding around the campus lakes, I peddled hard for the like-minded, poster-covered, rock-filled refuge of my fraternity house. With my mind challenged and my heart in conflict. I desperately needed to recover my balance.

I don't know what I expected as I neared my fraternity refuge and I knew the guys wouldn't be ready to hear about my near-religious experience, but I really needed to test the waters. Cautiously, I began to share my adventure of the night, vaguely hinting that I could see the truth in a lot of Josh's words and how I might even, at some point in the future, explore the claims of Jesus Christ seriously.

That's when the conversation's wheels began to spin off. My wise and trusted friends really pushed back. Without any hesitation or the slightest consideration of my feelings, they actually began to laugh out loud. And it didn't stop there.

From every direction my frat friends hit me with objections and questions that boiled down to this: How could I, being one of them in the midst of this vast intellectual college buffet, even consider such a stale old meal as traditional religion? I was pelted mercilessly with scoffing and sarcasm. The more I tried

to explain what I had heard, the more I began to feel like a fool.

Soon I realised that I was speaking from ignorance. My feeble attempts to duplicate what Josh had said went absolutely nowhere. Like hungry sharks after a wounded seal, my fraternity brothers ate me alive with mockery and scorn.

Then as quickly as it had started, it was all over. With the intellectual feeding frenzy finished (and the laughing finally subsiding), the guys made their way to their own private rooms.

On the way out, one of the more vocal "brothers" even went so far as to throw the literature I had picked up into my own trash can. "You won't be needing this, will you?" was his parting comment.

I sat there in total silence. Rejected, stunned, alone. At the very least I thought my friends would listen. Up until now they had seemed to value my thoughts and opinions. But not tonight. Not even close. No one had any interest whatsoever in what I had experienced or what might be going on inside me.

All I knew was that I had been ambushed by some unknown force and in the process had made first contact with something beyond myself. And, I had escaped.

Yet despite what my fraternity brothers said, I wasn't so sure that escape was such a good thing.

Months passed but something about that night would never go away – something I never told my fraternity brothers about that night of first contact. In fact, I even had trouble admitting it to myself.

Yes, I did eventually get away that night. And yes, my friends managed to crush my curiosity. In fact, all seemed to

return to normal as the days turned into weeks, and the weeks into months. But all was not normal. All was not well in the depths of my soul. And somehow, way down deep, I knew it.

You see, just before I ran out the back door of that assembly hall – just as Josh McDowell began to pray – I had bowed my head. When he had asked God "to touch that lonely heart out there and reveal Himself to that one who had a hunger," I knew he was praying for me. I was never so sure of anything in all my life.

His aim in prayer was as straight and true as when he had been lecturing. And as it happened, I hadn't been quite as quick to escape as I had expected. With my head bowed, I silently confessed to Whoever might hear my thoughts that I had a need.

The words and events of that evening remained deeply ingrained in my mind. In my soul and spirit, I sensed an ongoing, silent movement that I could not explain. Something or Someone would not go away.

Like the smallest of splinters that you just can't quite reach or an itch in a place that you just can't scratch, something powerful was at work in my heart. I simply could not remove that discomfort, no matter how hard I tried.

I sensed that somehow, Something was lying in wait for me, Something strong and disturbing. Something, it seemed, was lurking in the shadows of my life even in those moments when I tried my hardest to recapture the camaraderie, the mostly forced joy and festive atmosphere that I always associated with the "good old days."

Discussion Questions

Chapter 5 – First Contact

1. Do you remember the first time you ever heard the gospel stated clearly? What was your response to it?
2. Did that have anything to do with you coming to Christ later in life?
3. Kelly's friends were not very encouraging. Have you experienced anything like that?
4. Why do you think Kelly's friends responded the way they did? Didn't they have respect for what he could have been learning?
5. What does Psalm 1:1-2 tell us about ourselves as we receive counsel?

chapter 6

a hole in my soul!

"Close your eyes and make a wish." Have you ever done it? Probably. What else could you do when it's your birthday and everyone is screaming, "Make a wish, make a wish!"?

Have you ever done it when it wasn't your birthday? Of course you have. We all have. In fact, we're so good at it we can do it with our eyes wide open.

All through my childhood, into my teens, and even into college, I'd made a wish. It wasn't just at birthdays. It was deeper and much more long-range than that. I did it anywhere and everywhere. And for the most part, I did it alone.

I wished on my bike. I wished in the shower. I wished at church, in school, and at band practice. I wished when I was working and playing. I wished at second lunch and second

base. When making passes or catching passes, I made my wish. Eyes closed and straining or wide open and staring, it didn't make a difference. I was locked in to the "wish syndrome."

Then one day, I stopped. I had to. There was no more reason to wish. There was nothing left to wish for. Bang! Everything I had ever wished for had come true! In fact, I found myself with more than I had ever dreamed.

That's right, twenty-seven years of wishing, hoping, dreaming and searching were suddenly over. It was finished. I could stop wishing now. Here it was – every aspiration right in my grasp!

But with the fulfilment of my every wish came one haunting question, "Now what?"

You see with every wish and dream come true, something was terribly wrong. I didn't know how to enjoy it. In fact, I didn't have a clue.

Not knowing how to enjoy what I wished for became more frustrating than not knowing if I'd ever get it. Why? Because at least before I got it, there was still hope. And now, hope seemed be gone.

"How could this happen?" I thought. This doesn't make any sense. How could every wish come true without enjoyment? That doesn't seem right, does it?

It got worse. The very presence of each dream-come-true only served to reveal that something else was missing. Way down deep something was empty, hollow, and void. Every wish I had ever made was a vain attempt to fill something I didn't know existed. And the irony of all ironies was this: the arrival of every dream-come-true brought with it a companion called "emptiness."

The whole thing seemed strangely twisted. You make a wish to fill a void, yet when the wish arrives the void gets bigger. What was that all about?

One of the most important of my fulfilled wishes was tall, blond, intelligent and beautiful. She had values and she had dreams – and fortunately for me, I happened to be one of them. Our immediate connection brought whirlwind dating, lots of travel and a happy marriage. We quickly found that "perfect little house in the country," and off we went to restore it and start the family for which we both dreamed.

Our firstborn was perfect in every way. She had her mother's golden hair and bubbled with personality. She was bright, alert and (best of all) compliant. This was a blast. Let's have another one!

And so we did. We had another little girl who was equally as bright, just as beautiful and altogether lovely. Beautiful wife, beautiful girls, and the house in the country.

But, now I had a problem. My wish list was suddenly complete. Now what? That was the nagging question.

Before I knew what was happening, things got more complicated – my happiness started to outrun my ability to wish. I had a passion for plants, and quickly studied and excelled in landscaping. This was too much. Now I had something I hadn't even wished for – my own business. It almost seemed that someone else, someone I couldn't quite identify, was adding to the list. My life was totally charmed.

Totally charmed. That sounds so complete, doesn't it? So why were my drives to work hindered with doubt? Why was I feeling lonely in the midst of such apparent happiness? Why wasn't there any closure on "heart issues," such as lasting peace

and contentment? What was wrong with this party?

I had been raised in a nice Catholic home. In fact, I really liked my religion. I was in choir and band. I was even an altar boy who often thought of the priesthood.

But even an all-boy Catholic high school couldn't keep the religious fires burning. I drifted away from my spiritual roots quickly, and by college I was an independent thinker without any moorings, looking for the meaning of life.

I should have caught on at college. If fun was the question, I had the answer. College was a blast, but for my soul it was empty. And then I found the first thing on the wish list, the girl of my dreams. We each thought the other would fill the empty spot in our lives. We both thought wrong.

Soon after our second child, Mary and I both knew something was missing. Our marriage was as good as it could be with only a human foundation. We both knew religion wasn't the answer. Yet we both believed in God and thought that, somehow, He was important. So how did those two ideas fit together? We couldn't figure it out.

We loved our life and loved each other but we knew there had to be more. Perhaps children were the answer. No, the children fulfilled us in many ways, but ultimately they couldn't fill the hole in our souls.

At work I was making an incredibly rapid rise in the landscaping field. In business for myself, I had become a wanted and needed commodity. It felt good for a while. But success created a host of problems I hadn't anticipated.

A sudden burst of business expansion and unexpected financial demands left me cash poor and getting poorer. It had grown too fast and I couldn't manage what I had built. Ironically,

having too much business became worse that having none at all. I was losing what little grip I had on my life, and fast.

The turning point came on a rainy Friday afternoon.

I had orders from my largest client to finish a certain home by Friday. I didn't need much coaxing. I needed the funds. But Friday wasn't cooperating. The weather was bad. The men didn't show. And I was left in the rain with sod that couldn't be laid and erosion that wouldn't stop. The scene was depressing and the pressure was becoming more than I could take.

On a bundle of sod, caring little about the rain that was drenching me, I sat there soggy and cold and very afraid. I had questions that had no answers. And fear began to hit me as hard as the raindrops. I was beginning to realise that when I came to really understanding life, I was clueless.

It struck me that my life was a lot like the yard I was sitting in. It was eroding. I knew enough about erosion to know that by the time the rain stopped, all of the topsoil I had just put in would be three blocks down the road. That described my life. I had a lot, but I sensed things were slipping away. Unless I did something I would easily lose everything. The rain did well to hide my tears.

I hardly noticed it when Al pulled up. Perhaps it was the rain, or maybe the tears. But either way, I paid him little attention. He was like a fixture at every job I worked, and for the most part I had tried to ignore him. He and I worked for the same builders. I had known him for a year. He always seemed to be around somewhere.

Let me say right off, I didn't like Al. Not that he wasn't likeable enough as a person. Al was very likeable. He wasn't the problem. The problem was his message. You see, Al loved

Jesus and he wanted you to know it.

Catch the picture. Al was the local air-conditioning man. He was 5-feet-5 and a biscuit away from 95 kilos. He was always in his personal uniform, part of which was his worn baseball cap. "His special cap," as he called it, has a big yellow smiley face on it that said, "Smile, God Loves You!"

To make it worse, his perfectly rounded face matched that patch in every way. His face was always stuck with a smile!

Worst of all, in 10 or so minutes you could count on the fact that Al was going to tell you about Jesus. Like a broken record, he'd ask:

"Did I ever give you my testimony?"

"Did I ever tell you how Jesus changed my life?"

"Did I ever tell you how Jesus saved my marriage?"

Count on it. One or more of those questions was coming. It was only a matter of how or when. "If" was never the issue.

I had handled Al well during the year I knew him. At least I did until that day when I was sitting there on that pile of sod. That was the day he got to me – or should I say, that is the day that Jesus chose to get to me.

Al was out of his truck and had barely shut the door. He wasn't even that close to me. And there it came, a voice out of the rain.

"My, it's a beautiful day today," he said with that locked-in smile of his.

"That's cute Al," I started in. "It's a beautiful day. That's real cute. I think the day _____."

By now he was next to me and his smile was as big as ever. He paused and studied me for a moment and then plunged right ahead. The rain didn't faze him.

"My, how your countenance has fallen!" He blurted out with direct eye contact.

"Countenance," was it? Was he making fun of me or just trying out a new vocabulary word? It didn't matter. I wanted no part of him.

I quickly shot back, "Yeah, my countenance has fallen. Yours would too if you were in the jam I'm in. I've got to get this yard done by this afternoon. And look at this, it's raining and won't stop. The men haven't shown up. And, I'll have nothing for the bank come Monday. Yeah, Al, it's a beautiful day."

Al was quick enough to get his usual main point: "Looks like you need Jesus to fix this one up!"

I was quicker: "No, what I need is the rain to stop and four guys to lay this grass."

Pausing to look around, he chuckled. I didn't get it. I'm coming apart in the rain and this guy laughs. I didn't know whether to hit him or spit at him. But he didn't give me a chance to decide.

"That's just what you think you need, Hot Dog! I know what you really need. You need Jesus to come in here and take control. That's what you really need!" All the while, he didn't lose his smile.

That was it. After a year, I had heard enough. Al just picked the wrong guy at the wrong time to preach Jesus. He was about to get his. I was off the sod so fast it startled him.

"Let me tell you something Al," I snarled, moving towards him. "I know all about Jesus. I know He was the Son of God, born of the Virgin Mary, the second person of the Trinity, died on the cross for my sins and rose from the dead. You can't tell me anything about Jesus that I don't already know. I know all

about Him."

Al wasn't moved. He gave it a second just to see if I was done and then he calmly looked me in the eye.

"Well…You really do know all about Him don't you? But you don't know Him like I know Him. You see, He's my friend." With that he pointed to his heart, all the while never losing his smile.

I was pretty quick on my feet. I usually had an answer for anything (if I got in a jam). That is, until that day. For the first time in my life I was speechless. I was speechless because for some strange reason I knew that the man was right. He spoke the truth. And he did it with love.

With three carefully placed sentences Al had not only brought perspective on how much I didn't know, he had also identified the hole in my soul that I could never fill by myself and my own achievements. Right there in the rain I was beginning to see the truth. Hanging right there between my anger and his love, I caught a glimpse of what I had never seen before. Light! It was in his eyes and burning brightly. This guy had what my every earthly wish and effort could not quite touch. This man had a genuine relationship with God. One so real and palpable that it permeated his rotund presence.

That was all he said. The rest was done with a look. Finally, I turned and walked away. I may have muttered something but my goal at the moment was to hide. I had to get away from Al.

There are plenty of spots on a construction site to hide from an air-conditioning man. But, behind the house and between two air-conditioning units is not one of them. He found me in less than 10 minutes. He picked up where he left off.

"Hey Kelly, I wasn't quite finished," he continued, still

smiling. "I have to tell you how to get what you need."

"Don't bother Al," I shot back. "I'm not interested."

Again he wasn't fazed. "You think you're not interested, but I'm going to tell you anyhow. No, I'll show you. You see, I'm a Christian."

The words hit me like a brick. I had never in my entire life heard anyone say in so many words that they were a Christian. As annoyed as I tried to appear on the surface, I was silently impressed.

"A Christian?" I asked. "You mean the kind they feed to the lions?"

"Exactly that kind," he replied while smiling even brighter.

"Why don't you come to church with me this Sunday?" he continued.

"Look man," I said, suspecting that he was involved in some highly emotional sect, "I don't know anything about your church and I'm not interested in rolling around on the floor with anybody."

Again he laughed. "We don't roll around on the floor. We read the Bible."

"Well, I'm not supporting your fancy big buildings," I said. "After all, most churches are just out to get your money, aren't they?"

"Well, no kidding," Al chuckled. "But what would you give anyway? It's obvious you don't have any money right now. And besides, we don't have a fancy building. We meet in a trailer."

"Oh, I'm impressed. A trailer!" I said sarcastically.

"Oh, don't worry, you'll love it. It's a double-wide." And with that he smiled even more broadly.

By now he had started to wear me down. He finally got me

to agree to church and before he left I found that I was actually looking forward to it.

Sunday came and Mary and I found ourselves at the double-wide trailer. A hundred people had crowded in, all packing Bibles. Contrary to my expectations, I actually felt welcomed. Also, the sermon was surprisingly powerful and I had to acknowledge, if silently, that the preacher had gotten to me more than a little.

He talked about sin, love, and commitment. I was moved. I even picked up a little book at the front door that was supposed to show you, through a sequence of Bible verses, how you could get connected into a relationship with Jesus Christ.

But when I left the make-shift church, I knew that I was still in control of my life – and I wasn't quite ready to surrender that control. That would take an "act of God," I thought smugly.

But I didn't fool my wife. As we drove home that day she turned to me and said, "You were moved today, weren't you."

"Yes," I replied.

"Me too, Kelly. These people are different. I can see it. What do you think about the idea of making a commitment to Christ?"

"I like everything but the commitment. I don't think that's necessary. That's for fanatics."

But Mary wouldn't be put off. "I don't think so, Kelly. I think the commitment is for anyone who wants to come to Jesus. I don't think it's an option."

But I couldn't quite take the leap. In fact, I was still reeling off the objections in my mind when I got hit over the head with more crises that I like to remember – business problems, family decisions, you name it. They seemed to come one after

another. The entire week was a series of nagging circumstances.

But nothing in my life was like the following Friday morning. When Mary shook me I knew it was early, but I was stunned to see that it was only 3:00 am.

"Kelly, wake up. Quick, come here."

She led me to the bathroom where our two-year-old, Summer, stood in her little pink nightie next to the toilet. At first I wondered why I was there. What was there to see? She looked up.

"What's up?" I asked.

"Look, Kelly! Look in the toilet," Mary pointed with obvious fear.

I noticed that the water was dark but I still didn't understand. "Mary, I don't know what you want me to see. What is it?"

"It's blood! That's what it is! Look at it. It's blood, Kelly!"

It really didn't seem possible. Summer was standing there like nothing was wrong. She looked as content as when we had read her to sleep six hours earlier. There was no pain, no crying, and no discomfort. But there was blood, and lots of it. We both stood there stunned.

There are a lot of ways that God can humble you. And waiting in a sterile white room for the doctor to tell you about your daughter's options are one of them.

The doctor, all business, took me into his office right away. He only needed a minute. "Your wife's right. It's blood," he said frankly. "I don't know what this means, but we'll start this afternoon with a proctoscope. Be at the emergency room at 3:00 pm."

I didn't like the sound of that. "What's a proctoscope?" I

asked fearfully.

"Well, it's a little tube that inflates air into the stomach area and allows us to get some pictures inside. We'll put her to sleep and she won't feel anything. It'll be fine."

But, this was getting scary. It was also happening too fast. Before I could blink, we were at the hospital, reading to Summer before the test began.

I'll never forget how beautiful Summer looked in her pyjamas holding her little dolly as we read to her. She continued to smile even though she knew that something was up. In childlike faith, she trusted us.

The procedure began uneventfully. Anaesthesia was administered, and Summer was asleep very quickly. Immediately the small proctoscope tube was inserted. You could see her little tummy swell as the air inflated it. Slowly the little camera did its work and the doctor seemed pleased. So far, so good.

Then, without warning, everything changed. We were about ten minutes into the procedure when Summer suddenly woke up!

"Daddy, help me. Help me, Daddy." She screamed in pain.

"Hold her down," the doctor commanded. "Kelly, hold her shoulders." "Mrs Talamo, hold her legs." Even he was a little shaken.

For 30 or so seconds, the room became frantic. Three of us, Mary, myself, and a nurse, found ourselves holding down a little girl who was supposed to be under anaesthesia. A little girl who was now wide-awake and in a lot of pain.

As I held her shoulders, she looked me right in the eye and continually cried, "Daddy, please help me!"

What could I do? I was stunned, scared, and helpless. It

was agony. She was the joy of our lives and she was in trouble. Yet I could do nothing.

As I stared into her eyes, however, I had other thoughts. Suddenly, everything became very clear. It was as if the Lord was doing this just for me. He was saying, "Okay, big man, you said you're in control. Do something."

The words hit me like a Mack truck. "Do something. Do something." I knew I couldn't. At that point, I became a broken man.

Then, just as suddenly and again without warning, Summer tilted her head and went back to sleep, once again under the influence of the anaesthesia. We quietly backed away but the doctor's response said it all.

"I can't explain what happened here, Mr Talamo."

I just looked at him. I didn't say a word. He didn't have to explain. I understood perfectly. God was in control and I wasn't. He had just made a move on my heart. The next one would have to be mine.

That night we ate our dinner in silence. Neither Mary nor I wanted to discuss what we had just seen. I think we understood that God was dealing with us on the deepest possible level. There was no reason to say anything.

Mary put the children to bed alone that night while I sat in the den and gazed out the window. It was all I could do to keep from weeping. Yet I knew that weeping is what I really needed.

I was dying for understanding. What was wrong with my daughter? What was wrong with my life? How could I be surrounded by love and still be lonely? I was sick inside. Why me? Why me?

My silent hell continued until Mary's voice calmly broke the

stronghold. She approached me slowly and gently that night. She does that when she has something serious to say or ask. Tonight, however, she wasn't asking…she was telling.

"Kelly. You know that I love you more than anything." Her tone was deeply serious. She had thought this one through. I simply listened. "Kelly, I would follow you anywhere. There is nothing I wouldn't do for you. Nothing! You know that."

She stopped. I knew there was more. "But tonight, I need to do something. Tonight, I'm giving my life to Jesus Christ."

As I looked at her standing there, I knew that she had decided. This statement wasn't for my approval. It was an invitation to join her. She was moving forward with or without me. And though she hadn't asked, I knew I had to choose.

I stood to meet her and took her hand. "Not without me, you're not!"

"Do you still have that little book from the church?" she asked.

"Yes, and I know exactly where it is. I'll get it."

Together on May 1, 1980, the two of us knelt on the floor of our den. We walked through the Bible verses and explanations, word for word. Then, at the end, we confessed that we were sinners – that we were separate from God and could never do anything on our own to bridge the gap to Him – and prayed together to receive the Lord Jesus Christ into our hearts.

After it was over, Mary looked at me with tears of joy and asked, "What do you think?"

I said, "Let's pray again in case that prayer only counts for one person!"

And so we did. The ultimate wish had finally come true.

A Postscript on Summer

When the doctor had finished his exam earlier that afternoon, he had told us, "I don't see anything wrong."

He was perplexed. Disappointment hit us.

"Nothing wrong? How could there be nothing wrong? Blood doesn't just appear? We need some answers. We need them now!"

Disappointment turned to fear when he responded with "Let's see if the lab picks up anything?" Those words hit us hard. The lab! This really could be serious. But fear quickly gave way to anxiety when the lab told us, "It would be Monday before we had any results."

Monday? Are you kidding us? How can we wait through the weekend for that kind of news? How can we remain sane for 48 hours not knowing which way our life was going to turn? How could we maintain balance? How could we go on?

That's the point. You don't! You can't! It is impossible. And that was the realisation Mary came to as she tucked Summer in that night. And, it was that resolve that led her to approach me with her decision. Jesus was the only answer to this madness.

That night after praying to receive Christ, Mary and I slept like babies. In fact, that weekend was the first weekend of our marriage that was lived in total peace. Imagine that! Peace in the middle of not knowing. Nothing had really changed, and yet it seemed that everything had changed. There were still problems at the bank, there were still problems of direction, and there was still a major problem with Summer. But this strange peace took us by surprise. We were amazed at how we were suddenly handling life. And we were doing it without hearing

from the lab! Somehow, we knew that we weren't alone.

Summer had never been in any pain from the first sign of the problem until now. As the weekend progressed, the blood flow diminished. And, by Sunday evening it had stopped completely. She was apparently back to normal.

As promised, the doctor called on Monday with the results from the lab. Mary took the call.

"Everything is normal, Mrs Talamo. We can't seem to find anything wrong. I think we may have to move on to more extensive tests. How is she doing?"

"Doctor, she's doing fine. The bleeding has stopped completely." Mary replied. "Let me talk to Kelly and we'll decide what to do next."

"That's fine," he said. "Keep a close watch on her during the week and call me if anything begins again."

We're not doctors. Not even close. And as young parents we didn't take chances with our children. I can't even tell you why we decided to do what we did. And perhaps it was the peace of God that was suddenly ruling over our every decision.

We watched Summer closely. Throughout the week there was never any sign of the problem again. And we had decided that if nothing showed up, we would forgo further testing. We believed God had used her to do His work and that when He was finished He had healed her. And with confidence we made that statement to the doctor.

She is now a young adult. She never had the problem again.

What was it? We never found out. And it appears we'll never know the physical details. We don't need to. We know the spiritual ones.

In a way, God makes wishes. He desires, "that not any of us

perish, but all of us come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). He wanted us, and He took us "out of the kingdom of darkness and into the kingdom of His beloved Son" (Colossians 1:13). And using the tool that held our hearts at the time, a precious two-year-old, He broke us.

When we make a wish we close our eyes, hope in the dark, and blow out a candle. When God does it, He lights a candle in our heart, opens our eyes, and illumines our life with His Son.

How much better are the wishes that God makes?

There's no comparison. God's wishes are the only ones that are able to fill the hole in one's soul.

Discussion Questions

Chapter 6 – A Hole in My Soul!

1. Who was the first person you ever heard publicly claim to know Jesus Christ? What was your reaction?
2. What are your thoughts about Al? Do you know someone like him? Are they effective?
3. Name one thing in your life you thought would have fulfilled you but didn't. Do you have a secret wish? Something for which you have been hoping?
4. What did you learn about God from the way He handled Summer in this story?
5. Read Ecclesiastes 1:1-9. What does that tell us about "the hole in our soul"?

chapter 7

my best friend

What can be said about a best friend? The adjective itself seems to say it all, doesn't it? He or she is simply the best and there is no equal.

Most of us can say that we have (or have had) a best friend. People rarely ask how many friends you have. But they may ask, "Who is your very best friend?"

When you reflect on your life, you probably can identify certain periods of time that are linked to one special person. Best friends carry that much weight. You don't forget them. In fact, you can't forget them.

With best friends come wonderful benefits. For starters, you can totally be yourself. There's never a need to pretend, and you know you're accepted even when you're not at your best.

What's really nice is that even after they've figured out you're not perfect, they still want to be around you. Your secrets are safe and your identity secure. You can say anything you want to them and still not lose them.

Or can you?

That's a question I want to explore with you in this particular ambush.

Let's begin our story by recognising the fact that most people have had more than one best friend. Ever wonder why?

Well, for one thing, life is seasonal and situations are constantly changing. Because of the passage of time or distance, a new person may have become closer to you than the "best friend" of the past.

Or perhaps, a major event has occurred in one of your lives that suddenly changed all the rules. With great disappointment or even horror, you have stood and watched as that best friend status went up in smoke.

There are lots of highs and lows in this "best friend" business But no matter what the case or what the cause, when you actually lose your best friend, you know deep down that you have lost more than words can ever express.

Without a doubt, for eight straight years Kenny was my very best friend. A talented musician from Dallas, Kenny was in New Orleans playing in a small college bar when we met. I had a tremendous interest in music and Kenny was a tremendous musician. As we talked between sets we immediately hit it off.

Like many musicians Kenny was paying his dues in small obscure clubs, just waiting to be discovered. It would probably be any day now, he believed.

Neither of us were Christians. He was married and

constantly on the road while I was single and living at home. When I learned that his band's current "hotel room" – the place where Kenny slept every night – was the very same stage they were playing on, I offered to take him home with me.

Before long we were the closest of companions. Our lengthy conversations, on every topic imaginable, would continue well into the night. Best friends don't keep curfews.

I tried to encourage Kenny both in his music and in his marriage. Life on the road doesn't produce a lot of good husbands. Soon after we met he went through a divorce. Later that year he was the best man in my wedding.

Kenny soon remarried, and he and his new wife decided to move down to Louisiana. Mary and I took them in to get them started until they were able to find work, which they did rather quickly.

For a while, Kenny helped me around our nursery, tending the trees and other plants. Soon he joined a country band in a nearby town and his young wife was hired as a vet's assistant.

They were two very idealistic, mother-earth-loving young people with hopes, dreams, and hang-ups like everyone else. They quickly adjusted to small-town country life.

Kenny and I spent most of our free time together. He taught me the guitar, and our relationship grew ever deeper. We were saying "I love you" before we ever knew what that meant, or before it became more fashionable for heterosexual men to express their feelings that way.

Then, out of left field, things got even better in our relationship. Before I knew it, I was playing in his band. I thought time had stopped. It was an absolute blast.

While living in Louisiana, Kenny had been experimenting

with the Baha'i faith. He was in his third year of what he called "growth". His wife, however, was only partly committed. She believed that everyone needed something, and this might be good for a while. And besides, Kenny loved it.

One night Mary and I went along with them to a meeting at some guru's place. But I couldn't get very excited about some guy who sat around all day with his legs crossed and his palms up. As much as I loved Kenny, I knew this wasn't for me.

Small-town life finally grew old for Kenny. It didn't appear that the "big break" could happen in Clinton, Louisiana. So he and his wife decided to move back to Dallas in the hopes of being discovered there.

They were only in Dallas a year before they were divorced. Number two for Kenny. As he put it, "We just couldn't get it together."

After the breakup, Kenny continued to bounce from band to band, and we talked often on the phone about the hardships that kind of existence presented for him.

Meanwhile Mary and I came to Christ. We had jumped into this new spiritual relationship with both feet and were growing like crazy. With great excitement I couldn't wait to tell Kenny about our newfound Friend.

I waited patiently and prayed faithfully for the right moment. I wanted to be sensitive because I loved Kenny so much and I was sure he would jump right in with me if I handled it correctly. The way that he loved me would surely mean that this new spiritual adventure wouldn't be a problem in our friendship.

I remember the day when I told Kirk, the man who was mentoring me in my new faith, about my friend Kenny. I had

mentioned to him that Kenny was "already a spiritual man and I'm sure he's going to be excited about Christ."

With great care, Kirk asked a simple question: "Kelly, what do you mean when you say that Kenny is already a 'spiritual man'?"

"Well, Kirk, the guy loves God. He already prays every day. He fasts once a month. He's got this little book of devotions that he follows daily. He's really cool. I don't think he reads the Bible, but he reads a lot of other spiritual stuff. When I tell him about Jesus, he'll see everything clearly. He'll jump right in."

There was no mistaking the look of concern on Kirk's face. The man was gentle and he didn't want to pop my bubble, but it was obvious that he didn't share my excitement.

"What's wrong, Kirk?" I asked.

"Kelly, when you say that Kenny is already spiritual man, is he part of any faith?"

"Why yes, he's a Baha'i. I don't know a lot about it. It's some sort of Eastern deal, but I do know that he loves it and that it's been good for him. Why do you ask?"

Kirk didn't say much. He quietly looked at me and then at his Bible. He had sort of a "what-do-I-do-with-this-novice" look on his face, so I broke the silence.

"Kirk. A guy can get to heaven if he's spiritual even if he doesn't follow Christ, can't he?"

At this point the man didn't hesitate. "No way, Kelly," he stated emphatically. He didn't even blink.

I jumped right on it. "What do you mean 'no way'? 'No way' is a very strong statement. How can you say 'no way'? You don't even know Kenny. He's a good man. He loves God. There is no doubt in my mind that he does. 'No way' is much too strong."

At this point Kirk very calmly opened his Bible. Like a tender father he calmly asked, "Kelly, may I show you something?"

He had opened his Bible to the gospel of John and pointed to a verse. "Here, Kelly, read this out loud."

Slowly, I began to read: "I am the way, and the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through me."

There it was – right there in red and white, John 14:6. Without a word, I just stared at the passage for almost a minute. I read it again. I still didn't say a word.

Kirk then turned to the first letter of John. "Here, read this."

Again I read. "He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life." I was stunned. There it was again in 1 John 5:12. Once more I stared, but the words didn't change.

This time Kirk broke the silence. "Kelly, the Baha'i faith is a cult. They don't believe that Jesus Christ is God and therefore cannot submit to him as God."

I had heard that word "cult" before and, even though I didn't understand the meaning completely, I knew it wasn't very complimentary.

"Kelly, I am afraid your friend is lost, and when you tell him about your commitment to Jesus Christ, I don't think he is going to be as positive as you might expect."

I was stunned. Did he say "lost"? Did he mean lost as in going-to-hell lost?

"Kelly, we need to pray for your friend. He's in deep trouble."

I didn't like this. No, in fact I hated it. But the strange thing about it is that I believed Kirk. Somehow, I knew everything he was saying was indeed true. His gentleness and

God's Word both bore witness to my spirit. Kenny was lost and in big trouble. God's word was very clear.

I sat there for minutes with new revelation and a broken heart. As I did, I began to see more. It wasn't only Kenny but all of the Baha'is, all of the cults. Jesus was indeed dividing people.

For the very first time I saw that day that I was involved in something bigger than I realised. This Jesus whom I now loved had much to say, and not all of it was easy to hear. I was overwhelmed.

I looked at Kirk and simply said, "Tell me more."

My urge to write Kenny became great. Surely, I thought, once he sees that he is in trouble and that the Baha'i faith is a cult, he'll run from that scene. I was certain of it.

I began my letter the very next day. I can't remember all that I wrote. But I know I said a lot. Perhaps, I may have said too much.

First, I know I told him about how Mary and I had come to Christ and what a difference it was making in our life and in our marriage. I told him that I knew that this is what was missing in his life and relationships and that if he came to Christ, life would begin to make sense.

I told him about the power of Christ to change a life and that everyone needed to be born again. It was all right there in the Bible. It had been there all along.

I also told him of what I had learned about the Baha'i faith and its emptiness. I encouraged him to flee.

For weeks I waited for a reply, and when it never came I decided I would call.

The conversation didn't go well. Kenny was as cold as ice. He said that the letter had offended him greatly and he couldn't

believe that I was so pushy about Jesus.

"What makes you so wise all of a sudden?" was his main question.

He didn't like my comments about his lack of direction and he spurned the criticisms of his guru. No, it didn't go well at all.

Still, best friends have rifts and then get over them. I surmised that before long this would cool and Kenny would wake up and come around. Best friends do that. They give each other room. Right?

Before Christ came into the picture, we couldn't keep away from each other for more than a month. So I was sure we wouldn't be separated now that Christ was involved. Christ would only make us stronger, not drive us apart. I was sure it would happen that way.

It was months before I got the letter, but it was not quite the message I had been waiting for. Kenny's words were cold and matter-of-fact. He said that he had seen a side of me that he didn't like. He didn't want to be around the new, self-righteous Kelly and it was probably best to back off for a while as friends.

Stunned at first, I still clung to the hope that he would come around. After all, he did say "for a while." I could live with that.

I missed him greatly. But the new love I was experiencing in the body of Christ had put a different perspective on what Kenny and I had called love. In fact our human love sort of paled in comparison to what God was showing us through the new believers we were meeting.

Still, I missed him and wanted him to see Jesus and to be a part of this new life.

"Love is patient." God says that. So I waited. In fact, I waited five years before I contacted him again. He had moved so

I had to hunt around, but finally I got a number that I could call.

A woman answered the phone and I asked to speak to Kenny. "Who's calling?" she enquired.

"It's Kelly Talamo," I answered quietly. There was a pause. I didn't know her but it was obvious that she knew who I was.

"Just a minute, I'll get him," she replied. The time waiting for him to come to the phone seemed to drag on and on. Finally I heard his voice.

"Hello?" he began, with obvious reservation in his voice.

"Kenny, it's Kelly. I've been thinking about you and I wanted to see how you were doing. I'm glad I could find you."

We proceeded to talk for about 10 minutes. It was cordial. We asked about our families and our lives. He informed me that he was fine and the woman who answered was his new wife. Before we hung up, he asked for my address. I was encouraged.

Four days later I received another letter from Kenny. It was very short and directly to the point. He simply said that too much time and distance had passed and there was no reason to pursue our relationship. He thanked me for calling, but asked that I not try to ever contact him again. There was no return address on the envelope.

That was quite painful. In fact, I have never really gotten over it. It's like a death without a funeral where there is a lack of any real closure.

But perhaps this is for the best. Even though I'm in pain, Kenny is alive and God is able to do His work. I still pray for him and I ask God to intervene in his life.

I also hold on to a vital truth. Even when God seems about to ambush your best friend, you can never predict the precise

circumstances or the final outcome. The Spirit of God blows where He wills and calls men and women as He chooses. I'm just the bait, not the snare.

But never forget that God is able to break any man or any woman, even your best friend.

Discussion Questions

Chapter 7 – My Best Friend

1. Did you ever lose a friend because of your faith? Tell the group about it.
2. Are you not sharing Christ with someone now for fear that something like this might happen between the two of you?
3. At what point do you think the relationship between Kelly and Kenny went in the wrong direction? Was Kelly too pushy or too direct?
4. How do you see this lining up with the sovereignty of God? Did God give us these great relationships for us to lose?
5. Do you think Kelly should have allowed Kenny to pursue his own faith and let God have His way through that pursuit?
6. What is it about the message of the cross that brings such division in a relationship?

chapter 8

who's behind the counter?

Stop and think for a moment about how many people you see every day who are behind some counter. There's the bank teller, the checkout person, the gas station attendant, the dry cleaner's attendant, the hardware clerk, the receptionist, the butcher, the baker, and maybe even a candlestick maker.

Many people spend a large part of their lives behind a counter in some store or shop. In fact, I can't think of a place of business that doesn't have a counter somewhere, and behind every counter is a person. You get the picture. They have their place and you have yours.

Ever wonder about that person behind the counter? Who is he? What is she really like? Do they like it on their side of the counter or would they rather be on your side?

Now think a little more deeply. Where is that counter person headed in life? Do they know God? And, why did God allow you to cross their path? It is pure coincidence? Well maybe, maybe not.

At times, the actions of that person behind the counter will say a lot about them. Looking into their eyes will usually tell you whether or not they enjoy what they do. Let something go wrong, and you can see just how much patience they possess. Ask them to do something out of the ordinary, and you'll very quickly know if they are there to serve you or if they're just watching the clock.

It's a mixed bag of people behind the counter. All sorts reside there. And, even if you think you know what you are going to find, you're often surprised. You could meet a jerk or you might meet a jewel. You never know – just as I didn't on that late August day a few years ago down in South Louisiana.

It was Thursday afternoon and my men and I had to meet a Friday noon deadline on a landscaping project. We were working at breakneck speed with the final goal in sight, and the guys were thinking bonuses.

When that attitude develops, I put on mental blinders and focus on just two things. One is to stay one step ahead of them with planning and materials. The second is to keep them neck-deep in ice-cold Gatorade. When they reach for one they expect it to be there. And when they're digging and planting in 36-degree Celsius heat with 98-percent humidity, they deserve all they can drink.

I was doing well with the work plans but found myself quickly falling behind with the drinks. So off I went to remedy the situation. The local Time Saver convenience store was only

three minutes away.

I arrived in record time, gathered the necessary fluids, and reached for some chips. I then made my way to the checkout counter.

While waiting my turn in line, I reflected on how great things were going in my life. I had a job that I was crazy about and business was booming. My wife and I could not get enough of our newfound faith. We were in love with God and felt His love toward us. To top it all off, we had more new friends in Christ than we could name. Shortly after becoming Christians we had a son, Jeremiah, and now our three children were healthy and growing. What more could I ask for? Spiritually and every other way, I felt higher than a kite.

The Time Saver was as alive as I was. It was about 3:30 in the afternoon and the place was hopping. Some workers were taking a break and others had called it a day and were getting a cold drink for the ride home. One lady next to me was contending rather unsuccessfully with her three small children. Other kids, just off from school couldn't decide how to spend the two dollars in nickels and dimes they had pooled together. There were people in every aisle and the line grew longer by the minute.

The young man behind the counter was working alone. He had both his hands full and could have used two more. Because three people were ahead of me, I had a few minutes before my turn arrived. I used them to focus on that young man behind the counter.

I was impressed. The guy seemed to be operating in a zone of his own. His sweet baby face lit up with a big broad smile every time he dealt with a new customer. His light brown hair flopped gently left then right as he greeted each person warmly

and individually. His moves were smooth and sure with no wasted motion. Obviously, he was an expert at this behind-the-counter business. He gathered items quickly, rang them up with speed, and bagged them with precision.

His soft voice was a soothing refrain on this hot humid day: "Yes sir…yes ma'am…thank you very much, and please come again."

The young guy was a genius at keeping the action moving, while lighting up the entire place up with his winsome personality. I wondered seriously if the Time Saver people realised what a gem they had here. He took customer service to another level. In fact, I found myself actually looking forward to dealing with him face-to-face. The guy was inviting.

When my turn came, he didn't disappoint.

"Hello," he said with a big smile. "All this Gatorade yours?"

"Well sort of," I replied. "It's actually for my men."

"What men?" he enquired with interest as he began his rapid scan of the bottles.

"I have a landscape company and the crew is very thirsty. They take such good care of me; I need to take care of them."

"Wow, nice boss," he replied as he moved rapidly through my order.

"Well, thank you," I replied. "God is teaching me how to appreciate my men. What's your name?" I asked, extending my hand.

"Gerry," he said proudly. "Gerry Brown, what's yours?"

"It's Kelly Talamo. I'm very glad to meet you."

He nodded politely and continued to smile as he reached for some empty bags. Before I knew it, Gerry had filled the bags and was sliding them toward me.

"That'll be $8.40, Mr Talamo," he said smiling brightly. I had no further Time Saver business and the line was getting even longer behind me. But I decided that I wasn't quite through. This guy was too nice, the connection too good. I felt like I had to know more.

"Gerry," I began, as I slowly gathered my bags. "Could I ask you a question?"

"Well, sure," he hesitated as he quickly glanced at the line that had formed.

But I pushed the line out of my own mind and concentrated only on the counter man: "Gerry, you've got a great presence behind this counter, and I really have enjoyed your service. As I was watching you I couldn't help wonder if you know God personally?"

Blushing, he began to shuffle his feet and again quickly glanced at the line behind me. "Well… I think I… well." Gerry was caught off guard, yet he didn't pull away.

I remember mentally detaching myself from the entire scene, looking at it in my mind's eye from overhead and thinking how great this encounter had become. I sensed Gerry was in a battle. He was torn by his own embarrassment, the ever-lengthening and restless line, and his inner hunger. A truly precious moment.

"Gerry, give me a second," I said quietly. "Don't worry about the line right now. Just listen a second. You're interested in God aren't you?"

"Yes," he replied, this time without hesitation.

"I can see that. So how would you like to visit a home where about thirty people who really know and love the Lord, gather to sing and get into His Word? We meet on Friday nights. It's

a blast. You could come as my guest."

Gerry didn't know what to say. I was a total stranger and today was already Thursday. His mini-battle raged and the line continued to grow. The shuffling and growling behind me seemed to get louder as Gerry just stood there for a few seconds looking at me. I sensed he really wanted to say yes but his cautious side didn't know me well enough to jump in that fast. I also knew that I needed to say something pretty quickly to get him off the hook.

"Gerry, I know this is happening fast but let me say that this group I'm talking about is by no means anything weird. They are normal people, most of them your age, with an above-average interest in letting God have His way in their lives. Tell you what, if you would give me your phone number, I'll call you and then maybe we can talk at a more relaxed pace. I want to be sensitive to your job here. Would that be all right?"

That's all he needed. He quickly wrote down his phone number and slid it across the counter. As he did, he mentioned that he was leaving on Sunday to go back to college. He had to pack, so tomorrow night might be kind of tight for him.

I assured him that it was fine and whatever he decided was okay with me. I said I'd call him later that night to give him directions to the spot where we were meeting just in case he decided he could come. If he couldn't, it wasn't a problem. He sighed with relief and quickly regained that bright smile as we shook hands and said goodbye.

On my way back to the job I knew God had introduced me to one very special guy. But in all my wildest dreams, I had no idea how much a part of my life Gerry Brown was going to become.

When I called him that night we picked up right where we left off. He was now free to talk and he had a lot he wanted to say. Our backgrounds were similar and conversation came easily.

He stated that he always felt that God wanted to have a personal relationship with him and that the idea had been on his mind for quite some time. He just didn't know how to go about it. He knew there had to be more to God than just going to church and claiming a religion.

We chatted for about 30 minutes. I then gave him more information about the study the next night and encouraged him to come. He said he would try.

Not only did Gerry try – he came early. And as God would have it, Gerry had picked a great night. That evening we had some excellent music and Gerry even knew a couple of the younger people who were there. The warmth of the crowd enveloped him and I watched with amazement as Gerry fitted in even more easily than I had at my first meeting.

I also noticed his surprise as I took the stool in the front of the room and opened the study up for prayer. I hadn't told him that I was teaching.

Before I was even halfway through the message, I caught Gerry's eye. There was no doubt about it – he was hooked. The mood of the entire evening was coloured by relationships, both human and spiritual. Gerry was looking for that special personal relationship, the one with God. When he saw the Spirit manifested in so many people at the study, he suddenly understood everything. He sealed his commitment to Christ that very night.

The next day he called to say how much he had enjoyed the study and how sorry he was that he had to leave for college the

next day. He said he could get used to something like that. I reminded him that people who love God are everywhere and I assured him that God wasn't going to leave him high and dry. I also made some suggestions on where to find fellowship while he was off at school.

Just as we were about to hang up I asked him if he would like something to read while he was away. I'll never forget his reply: "Would I ever! Bring it over."

That afternoon I took him copies of True Discipleship and Why Revival Tarries – two books that are pure dynamite for a young Christian. I asked him to read these and give me a call when he returned. If he liked, we could meet and talk about what he saw in the books.

It was like giving a 10-year-old a new bike. He just kept looking at them and saying, "Wow, this looks great! Thank you so much! Wow!"

It didn't take long before his letters started to arrive. Gerry was knee-deep in the books and neck-deep in Christian fellowship. In less than three weeks Gerry was in a Young Life Bible study and a weekly men's prayer group. God was all over the guy.

The most exciting thing about Gerry Brown, however, was not how quickly he was learning or how much zeal he had, though both were strongly evident. The most exciting thing about him was his clear commitment to obey the Word of God, no matter what the cost. He learned and kept the commandments of God like no other person I had ever met. If he heard and understood a divine principle he applied it. That is a rare and exhilarating sight for any spiritual mentor to behold. I was as moved as he was.

In many ways, Gerry had become a living commentary on John 14:21, which says that the sign of one who loves Jesus is the keeping of His commandments, and that the key to more revelation is not knowledge, but obedience.

Mary and I watched in awe as Gerry changed before our eyes. Whatever the issue, easy or hard, he always seemed to make the right choice. If it was the challenge of the tongue, an attitude of the heart, a need in a relationship, or honouring his parents, Gerry did it. If anything needed changing, he changed it. If it called for waiting, he waited. And if it needed prayer, he prayed. He stopped at nothing in his obedience, and never complained if the going got rough.

We continued our correspondence for the entire semester. I mentioned in one letter that he was welcome to come and work with me during the summer. He said that he had already committed to his job at Time Saver, but there might be some opportunity for him to work me in. As it happened, the Lord gave us most of the next summer together.

There are many stories I could share about the blossoming faith of Gerry Brown. In fact, he is so special, he deserves his own book. Time won't allow that, but I do want you to know how this one ends. You need to know so that you will never underestimate that person behind the counters of your life – so that you'll never be tempted to diminish the power and potential of each personal encounter, no matter how small it may seem at the time.

In addition to our work-time that summer, Gerry and I met regularly for prayer and fellowship. Gerry attended the Friday night study without fail, and later that summer I had the privilege of baptising him at one of the studies.

The following summer he worked with me full-time and we continued to grow close as brothers in the Lord. He had become family. He loved my wife and kids, and we all loved him as if he were our own.

He graduated from college that following May and quickly began his job search. He was both careful and prayerful and did nothing without checking first with the Lord. I can remember, as new possibilities crossed his path and important decisions had to be made, that he would always say: "As soon as I am sure that this is what the Lord wants, I'm there."

Gerry ended up in Dallas with a growing software company. We missed him and he missed us. Lonely at first, but convinced that it was God's place for him, he soon found a church and great young men for roommates.

Like clockwork, Gerry would call us once a month. When he did, he would always share with Mary or me his struggle with the newest challenge in his life – he really wanted to find a good wife. More than anything now, he desired to be married and raise a godly family. He would even add, "…and a family just like yours."

But there were some obstacles. For one thing, Gerry had some very high standards, both physically and spiritually. Sometimes, by his own admission, they were a tad too high. He was looking for a woman with the heart of Mother Teresa and the body of Kate Upton and he wasn't having great success in his search.

As with a lot of singles, the relationship hunt took a lot of his time and energy. Finally in frustration he was ready to give up. Mary and I would always chuckle when the phone would ring about 11:30 pm (10:30 pm Dallas time). We'd look at

each other and say, "That's Gerry." And, it usually was. As tired as we were at times, we always loved that call.

Finally, he gave up on the wife search and began to pour his energy into the Young Life ministry. Soon he was leading young people to Christ and was giving his life to other young men. With this, his joy returned and he was again excited about what God was doing in and through his life. He finally got the meaning of that biblical paradox; when you lose your life then, and only then, do you really find it.

That's exactly what happened with Gerry. As he lost his life in his ministry, he found the love of his life and the desire of his heart. I remember the night when he called to tell us how God had surprised him once again. There was a girl he had met through Young Life and he now realised he was in love with her.

So the years of searching were finally over. It became obvious that God had selected just the right woman for him. And he had found her as soon as he had quit looking for her. She was nothing like he pictured, but better than he dreamed. Just like God, I thought to myself.

Gerry's years with the Young Life ministry had been fruitful. Some of the men he had led to Christ were now leading other men to Christ. He was now engaged to his new love and he called to ask me to participate in his wedding in Dallas. I couldn't wait.

His wedding was beautiful, as was his young bride. The place was packed with people that loved them both. Mary and I couldn't have been prouder if he were our own son; and in the spiritual sense, he was.

But the ceremony wasn't perfect. Gerry confided that he was bothered by a nagging backache, a seemingly mild ailment

that he had been having for quite some time. But even with that he never ceased to smile.

The backache continued to come and go but it never seemed to disappear. He told us he had learned it was some sort of kidney problem, but the doctors expected to have it cleared up in about a month.

Some things are never what they seem. The kidney problem was one of them.

Two months later, further tests revealed cancer and the prognosis was grim. The malignancy was terminal and moving quickly. Radiation and chemo followed, but before his first wedding anniversary, Gerry Brown was at home with the Lord.

I can't tell you why this happened. This is one of those life situations that have given me great difficulty. Men like Gerry Brown are few and far between – men that hunger for the Word and then run to apply it – I find those types of guys to be very rare.

With men like this so few, and so much Kingdom work to do, I had some serious questions to ask God. I cried out, "Lord, why would you take him at the prime of his life and at the beginning of his marriage? Where is the wisdom in this?"

I still don't have the answer. I only have the same questions that you do. In the end, I am forced to trust in the wisdom of a perfect God who has never made a mistake. It's all I have and, by faith, that's enough.

But I will say this. I never look at anyone behind a counter quite the same. I can't. Not since I met Gerry Brown.

Discussion Questions

Chapter 8 – Who's Behind the Counter?

1. Is there anything like this that you've seen God do that makes you stand back and wonder why? What good could possibly come from this?
2. A large part of the witness to Gerry Brown came from Kelly and Mary's family. Has your family ever taken in an outsider to nurture and care?
3. What about those people behind the counter? Do you give them much thought or view them as potential opportunities? Does this story change your perspective in any way?
4. As touching as this story is, it's about more than sharing your faith with people behind the counter.
   It's about discipleship. Is that part of your life?
5. Read 2 Corinthians 2:14-17. What are your thoughts?
6. As you think this through, do you know a Gerry Brown that might be waiting for you to call?
   If you did call and you began to share your life with them and that person grew and multiplied his or her faith, wouldn't that be something good that came out of this tragedy?

chapter 9

flight 588:
wait 'til the second bloody mary

Being a high-level frequent flyer has benefits at times. There are moments when, without warning, Delta will just bump you up to first class. It's rough, I know, but I manage to submit to it when it happens. Tonight was one of those nights.

Settling into 4B about 10 minutes before take-off, I ordered a cold drink, hit the recline button, and opened my Bible for a good time with the Lord. This was an evening flight, but there was still some time for conversation before lights out. So I took a moment and prayed: "God, please give me an opportunity to share something about you with someone tonight."

It was that simple. I don't always do that but this particular night I did.

Just before the airplane doors closed, an average-looking

man in his mid-thirties rushed in and slumped down beside me. He had obviously been running and had apparently just made the flight.

"Hi," he said with a relieved smile as he put his briefcase away and handed the flight attendant his coat.

She took it and asked him if he would like something to drink. "Bloody Mary," he replied as he reached for the Newsweek in front of him.

I looked over and introduced myself. His name was Bob. We exchanged a friendly greeting and I returned to my Bible as he settled in with Newsweek.

The flight from Atlanta to Dayton, Ohio was exactly 60 minutes. As I began to read, I sensed that God was going to answer my prayer with this man. Quietly excited, I continued my reading and waited for my opportunity.

Bob was fidgety. He moved from Newsweek to Sports Illustrated, back to Newsweek, and on to Sky magazine. Every once in a while he would glance over to my open Bible and then back to his own reading.

The time was passing by quickly. Glancing at my watch, I noticed that we were already 20 minutes into the flight. I can remember thinking that if God was going to do something He needed to move a little faster. We were almost halfway!

As friendly as Bob was at first, he didn't say another word to me as we flew through the night. He did his thing and I did mine. I had considered initiating a conversation. I sensed it might even be easy but I was expecting him to do that, so I continued to wait.

As his drink got lower and lower, I made a decision that if he ordered another one and had not yet spoken to me then

I would initiate the conversation. Two Bloody Marys! That should be enough to loosen any man up.

Very shortly, he signalled the flight attendant for his second Bloody Mary. It arrived quickly, and was consumed even more quickly. As I watched that second Bloody Mary go down at a faster pace than the first, I knew Bob was as relaxed as he needed to be. So I turned to speak with him.

"Bob, could I ask you a question?" I began.

"Sure, go right ahead," he replied as he examined the rapidly sinking level of his second drink.

"Well, I was wondering about something. I've been sitting here for thirty minutes reading a Bible. I know you noticed that. I was just curious as to what was going through your mind as you sat next to a man for 30 minutes while he read a Bible. Would you comment on that for me?"

"Funny you should ask me that. I was just sitting here wondering, 'Why is this guy reading a Bible this whole time? What is he getting out of that?'"

"Well, I'm glad you asked that Bob. Let me tell you," I replied quickly. "One of the reasons I read it is because the Bible has the answer to any question that life can present."

"No way," he shot back with a smile.

"Yes, it's true," I continued. "Would you like me to show you?"

"Sure," he answered, finishing his drink.

Now here is where I went out on a limb. I usually do not do this, but this night I took a chance. "Okay, Bob, think of some problem in life that you would really like the answer to. What is it about life that you don't understand? Tell me and then we'll look at what God has to say about it in the Bible."

As those words came out of my mouth, I can remember thinking. "Kelly Talamo, that was absolutely the dumbest statement you have ever made in your entire life! How in the world are you going to back that up?"

Bob pondered the question before he spoke. This gave me a second to catch my breath, and also to gauge the full range of my stupidity. Yes, I concluded, I was indeed into this thing over my head.

"Well, I really can't think of anything," he answered thoughtfully.

It was obvious that Bob was trying to come up with something profound, and frankly I was thankful that he was stumped.

I could have changed the subject at that point. But apparently gripped by some sort of death-wish, I continued to press him: "Come on Bob. Think of something. Don't you have any questions about life that really puzzle you?"

"Gosh," he replied, "there are a lot of things I don't understand but I can't really name any at the moment." (The Bloody Mary seemed to be working for common sense and against my foolishness).

Fortunately, his reply provided me with an escape hatch because now I could suggest a topic for our discussion. "Well, let's see," I continued, this time directing the conversation into an area that I thought I might be able to handle. "Do you have a garden or a yard at your home?"

"Yes," he replied, "I do have a garden. What does the Bible have to say about gardening?"

"Well, it says a lot about gardening. It even gives us insight into why there are weeds and why gardening is such toil. Have

you ever wondered why there are weeds and so many problems in your garden?"

"Of course," he jumped in. "Everyone wonders about that. Weeds drive you crazy."

"Yes they do," I continued. "But wouldn't you like to know why they exist?"

"Yeah, let's see it."

As I opened up my Bible, I can remember thinking how close I had come to revealing my ignorance. In a silent prayer, I expressed my relief: "That was close. Thank you sweet Jesus."

What if this guy had asked me one of the ten hardest theological questions about the Bible? What would I have done? Simple. I would have told him I didn't know. People appreciate honesty and genuine humility can be very powerful.

But now I had an opportunity to deal with something practical, something I should know about since I had done landscaping by profession for 15 years. But what part of the Bible could I relate meaningfully to weeds? The first passage that came to my mind was Romans 8:19.

"Let's read this together Bob," I began. He leaned over close and followed along as I read Paul's words to him.

"'For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God.' You see here, Bob, the Bible says that creation is waiting for something. Not only that, note the attitude – it's anxious."

At that very moment, the entire atmosphere changed. It was as if there was nothing and no one else around us. No noise, no flight attendant, no Bloody Mary. The Word of God has an incredible calming effect, even on those who don't know it's the Word of God.

Bob nodded in understanding, so I continued to verses 20-21. "'For the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God.'"

I paused for a moment, just to be sure the words had sunk in. Then, I proceeded, "You see Bob, here is the result after Adam fell in the Garden of Eden and God cursed the ground. The Bible tells us here that from then on, there would be thorns and thistles – weeds, to us. And Adam would have to work with them and endure them by the sweat of his brow.

"This is also the situation that confronts us. But there's a bright side to all this – an escape from our world of weeds. You see, the creation is not only cursed, but it desires to be made whole again. Look, it actually groans."

At that point, I read verse 22: "'For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now.'

"You see, Bob, this is why we have weeds. God cursed the ground because we disobeyed Him and creation remains in trouble. But in spite of all this, God wants to put it all back together – without the weeds."

I looked closely at Bob, and he still seemed to be with me. But I checked to be sure:

"Does this make any sense to you?"

"That's very interesting," he replied. "I never knew that."

"Oh man, it gets better. You see, God doesn't just want us to know about weeds, but about ourselves. Verse 23 talks about us: 'And not only this, but also we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body.'

"You see, Bob, it says here that people also groan. We groan

because we know deep down that this world is not all there is. There has to be more. Our own emptiness tells us that there must be more to life than this place or our daily activities. We may try all sorts of activities to fill those empty places inside us. But before long, we find things just don't do it. The real problem is that apart from God himself, Bob, we all come up empty."

My words seemed to have stunned him. He just sat there with his mouth slightly open, staring at the Bible for a few moments.

Finally, he said, "That makes a lot of sense. I've tried a lot of things that have not worked. It seems as though I am always trying something new to fill that void you're talking about. That makes a lot of sense."

Bob then opened up to me. He released a torrent of revelations about his marriage, his child, and his frustrations at work. I simply sat there and listened to him intently. I cared deeply about him in those moments and the best way to communicate my feelings was just to listen. People appreciate that.

When he was through, I asked him where he lived. His home wasn't very far from the airport, so I asked him if he would be willing to meet for dinner the next evening to continue our discussion. He said that would be great since his wife and child had other plans the next day and he would be alone.

I encouraged him to think through the claims of Jesus Christ and to begin to ask God to reveal to him exactly who Jesus Christ was. I assured him that if he asked with an open heart God would come through with an answer that would transform his life from one of questions to one of understanding.

As he nodded, that familiar voice came on and asked us to buckle up as we made our final approach into Dayton, Ohio.

There was much more I could have added, but I felt very content to leave some things on the table until dinner the next night. In the many spiritual conversations I've had with others, I've found that it's often best not to try to provide all the answers at first. People need time to digest new truths and God can use that time to generate genuine interest and inner hunger.

At least, that's my philosophy.

As I leaned back in preparation for the landing I was feeling rather satisfied and thankful with the way things had gone with Bob. But I was totally unprepared for what happened next.

Before my head had even touched the back of my seat, I found myself staring eyeball to eyeball at a wide-eyed, upside-down head suspended only inches away from my nose.

"Tell him to receive!" the head shouted. "Tell him to receive!"

Discussion Questions

Chapter 9 – Flight 588: Wait 'til the Second Bloody Mary

1. What part did prayer play in Kelly's encounter with Bob?
2. Does prayer make a difference in seeing and opening opportunities? Take a moment and list the differences you believe prayer can make.
3. What are your thoughts about the way the encounter began? Should Kelly have left him alone since he was drinking a Bloody Mary?
4. What do you think about the claim that Kelly made: "Ask me anything and we'll go to the word together and see what it says." Was that arrogant?
5. What were your thoughts about the way Kelly left it with Bob? Would you have asked him to pray to receive Christ or left it until the next evening?
6. Read Colossians 4:2-6. What does God tell us about prayer in that passage?
7. In 1 Corinthians 9:19-22, Paul makes some daring statements about reaching people. How do these statements affect your thinking?

chapter 10

flight 588:
ambushed by Leo

I have had a lot of strange things happen to me on airplanes.

There have been rapid, violent, drops in altitude where my heart suddenly ended up in my throat while the woman next to me had dug her nails a centimetre into my arm.

I've sat next to airsick kids and homesick salesmen. I've sat and watched outside my window while five men took two-and-a-half hours to change one landing light bulb.

Strange things happen all the time in the aviation world. But I've never witnessed anything quite so unexpected and bizarre as this.

As I said, my head had barely hit the headrest – and I had just begun to praise God for my time with Bob – when the man sitting directly behind us practically dove over the back of

my seat.

Leaning over so far that he was practically in my lap, he put his hand on my Bible and began yelling over and over, "Tell him to receive! Tell him to receive!"

I was stunned. Both Bob and I looked at him in utter, speechless amazement.

Still, he continued: "We're about to land and you may never see this guy again. Don't let him get off the plan without praying to receive."

Of course, I immediately knew what he was talking about. He was pushing me to get Bob to pray with me to receive Christ right then. To this guy, waiting until tomorrow might mean failure.

In other circumstances, I might have been impressed with the man's zeal. But given my reading of the way things had gone with Bob, I thought his methodology in this situation left much to be desired.

In an effort to salvage the moment, I turned to Bob and tried to explain: "What he's talking about is that to enjoy the life that Christ offers requires a decision. As you take a look at the claims of Christ, there will be a point when you have to decide just who your Saviour and Lord is. If you want Jesus, you then reach out and receive the free gift that God offers you in his Son."

Our new friend then butted in and began to press Bob: "Look, I couldn't help listening to the last thirty minutes. What this guy is telling you is the truth. Don't wait to receive Jesus. It is the best decision you will ever make in your life. I'm sorry for interrupting, but I just couldn't keep quiet any longer."

At that point the flight attendant approached and it was

apparent she wanted to have a little talk with our new friend. But the man caught the hint and decided to slip back into his own seat.

Trying to repair any damage, I turned to Bob and calmly mentioned that I was as surprised as he was about that.

"It's okay – I didn't mind," Bob replied.

Thankfully, there wasn't time to say anything else. In a matter of moments, the plane had landed and we were up and on our way. Bob and I exchanged phone numbers and agreed to meet the following evening on my way back to the airport.

As I proceeded to my baggage claim area, I replayed the whole experience in my mind. It had been quite a ride. You always enjoy having another believer coming to your aid. But I had never experienced, nor expected anything quite like what happened. The scene had been wild, to say the least.

At baggage I noticed our new friend walking about 18 metres away. He had picked up his suitcase and was heading out the door. More curious than annoyed, I wanted to speak with him for a moment just to find out more about his story. For me, part of the excitement in life is to watch God work in weird and startling ways, and I suspected this guy would have some strange tales to tell.

But it seemed we might not have a chance to talk since my bag hadn't arrived yet. Finally, there it was. I picked it up and headed toward the rental car lot – and was pleasantly surprised to find my man waiting patiently for a cab next to the kerb.

I walked over to him and extended my hand. "Hello, I don't believe we've formally met. My name is Kelly Talamo."

"Hello," he responded in a sheepish tone. "My name is Leo. Look, I think I need to apologise for my outburst on the

plane. I was listening to you talk to that guy the whole time. I was amazed at how that conversation evolved. You moved that thing to the spiritual so fast. It was a work of art. I kept waiting for you to close with a prayer, but you never did. And, well, I couldn't stand it any longer. I had to speak up. I didn't want the guy to leave the plane without praying. I hope I didn't mess everything up!"

My first reaction on the plane was that he probably did mess everything up. But I knew the end result was up to God and I wanted to put Leo at ease.

"Well Leo," I said, "it's very nice to meet you. Let me say to you that I know God was in charge of that conversation and you couldn't mess it up. I have to tell you though, I have never had anyone jump in like that. I had no idea that you were listening."

"I noticed that you had your Bible open and I thought that you were a believer," he said. "I was watching you the whole time and I was so moved at the way the whole thing went. I started praying for you as soon as I saw where you were going. I would love to be able to do that."

"Leo," I said, "on your next plane ride ask God for an opportunity and walk in the Spirit. If you're in the Spirit you'll see them when they come. But, I want to know about you. What brings on your zeal? Are you always that bold?"

He hesitated for just a moment – and then told me a story that made Flight 588 even more amazing.

"No, Kelly. Listen to me. I'm fifty years old. I've only been a Christian for one year. Most of my life has been a mess. My wife is a strong Christian and for fifteen years she has been telling me about Christ and what He could do for my life. She

is the greatest woman in the world and I've watched Christ change her from the inside out. I could never deny that what she said was true, but I wanted no part of anyone except me running my life. It took nearly losing my wife to wake me up."

Leo continued his story in earnestness. "Last year about this time, my wife and I had the worst argument of our lives. We were both yelling and screaming. It was horrible. She said very clearly that she had had enough and that she was leaving me for good. She didn't want to but she knew that it was over. As for me, I was not interested in making things better.

"She left our home totally upset, in a real rage. I knew where she was going and after an hour of fuming I decided to go and find her.

"About 10 kilometres up the highway I came to a busy intersection regulated by a blinking caution light. It was a rainy night and traffic was backed up.

"Up ahead I could see police lights and an ambulance parked at the intersection. Immediately I knew that there had been an accident. As I got closer to the intersection I was horrified to see that what looked like our car was in the centre of the intersection. It had been broadsided and was a twisted mess. I quickly realised that, indeed, it was our car!

"I pulled over to the side and began running toward the intersection. A policeman quickly stopped me and told me not to go any closer. I told him that my wife was in that car and I had to get to her. But as we turned toward the wreck, we saw the ambulance pulling away with sirens blasting. He informed me that my wife was in that ambulance and that she was badly hurt.

"I jumped back into my car and began following the ambulance to the hospital. And, as I sped to catch up to it,

God dealt with my heart. I began to replay the last fifteen years of my life. As I did, I could hear my wife's constant request: 'Leo, all I really want from you is for you to become a Christian and live your life for God.'

"She had said it many, many times but this was the first time I really heard it. I realised at that moment that all I ever really loved in this world was right there in that ambulance and that on this very night I might lose her.

"I was a broken man. Right there in my car, while following that ambulance, I prayed through my tears that God would forgive me of my sins and come into my life. I gave Christ my life right there.

"My wife lived. We are now rebuilding our lives and God is creating something wonderful again."

A bit choked up, Leo continued: "I saw clearly that night that I had wasted well over half of my life. I was sick about it and I told the Lord that I was going to live the years that I had left for Him. Now, every chance I get, I tell people about Jesus Christ and what He can do in their life. I am sold out."

I couldn't respond for a moment. I simply stared at him in amazement. "Leo, you have made my night. Thank you for sharing your story. Let's thank God together for this night of fellowship."

Right there in the Dayton airport, near the Avis express pick-up area, we enjoyed the fellowship of two strangers now connected deeply by the bonds of Jesus Christ. I took his hand and gave thanks.

From beginning to end, from boarding to baggage, all of the action had taken less than ninety minutes. In that short amount of time I had become God's bait for Bob. The Gospel

had been shared. I had been blindsided by a spiritual ambush myself – and two brothers had ended up encouraging one another.

Yes, it had been a first-class flight indeed.

Discussion Questions

Chapter 10 – Flight 588: Ambushed by Leo

1. What are your thoughts about Leo's bold move to help Kelly out? Do you believe that Leo messed up a good moment?
2. What do you think was at the heart of Leo's zeal?
3. Share your thoughts about Leo's wife and what happened on that rainy night.
4. Do you know anyone like Leo, someone who you think God may never reach? If so, have you prayed for them lately?
5. 2 Corinthians 5:17 is an incredible passage. What do you think it means?
6. Consider the perseverance of Leo's wife. Stop now and pray for your friend in a similar situation.

chapter 11

flight 588:
what about Bob?

After the spiritual roller-coaster ride with Leo I was expecting nothing less than something totally spectacular when I met Bob for dinner the following evening. During much of the day, I had been preoccupied in anticipation of our scheduled meeting. Several times during my business meetings, I had paused just to praise God and to ask His blessing on our dinner that night.

I had chosen a very relaxed place to meet – a restaurant with the word "friendly" in the name. If that was any indication of what was to come I figured that God and I were about to hit a home run. What could go wrong?

I arrived ten minutes early and chose a nice table for two over in a corner, away from what I thought might be any

distractions. I had done everything that I knew to do to get ready for my meeting with Bob – including extra prayers and Bible readings earlier in the day.

I thought big things were about to happen in Bob's life and it looked like I was going to serve as bait again. But this time Bob would finish by "receiving," as Leo would have said. Yes, I predicted confidently, tonight I'll seal the deal.

I could see Bob clearly through the window of the restaurant as he parked his car. Well-dressed and punctual, he moved briskly toward the restaurant. He seemed to be a man with a mission. I was gripped with excitement as he made his way through the doors and began to look for me. Spotting me, Bob made his way to our table and extended his hand.

Everything seemed to be moving along in a happy, predictable fashion – and that was my big mistake. God's ambushes are never predictable. I should have known from my past history that it would be unwise to expect anything to proceed according to some standard procedure. I should have, but I didn't.

It soon became evident that Bob was considerably more distant now than he had been when I talked with him on the plane. Our conversation was cordial and his tone was friendly. We never lacked for anything to say, but something had definitely changed. Something I couldn't quite identify, a kind of invisible fence had come between us.

It was difficult to pinpoint the difference at first. But as we continued to talk it became obvious that I was speaking to a very different man. In less than twenty-four hours Bob had gone from an open book to a locked-up fortress. I was now sitting with a person who seemed to indicate that he had no

spiritual needs.

Still, I probed. I asked him about how his day had gone and how his family was doing. He said rather matter-of-factly that it had been a good day and that his wife and child were glad to have him back home.

I asked him if he had a chance to think through what we had talked about on the plane. That was when I finally discovered why he was now so different.

"I'm so glad that we had that talk last night," he began. "You really helped me to get back to something that I had walked away from years ago. In fact, my wife and I talked about it as soon as I got home. She reminded me of so much that I had forgotten."

So far this sounded okay, but I still sensed that something wasn't quite right. Sure enough, as he continued, the conversation quickly headed south.

"You see Kelly, I went through a real spiritual period in my life about three years ago. I was reading and studying and I progressed a great deal. My life was full of peace and happiness. I had never been so in touch before. Things were really great. But when I got this new job I became real busy. I lost my focus and I started to walk away from what I was learning spiritually. I have paid for it ever since."

I was puzzled. I hadn't heard any of this spiritual stuff the night before. Why hadn't he mentioned this when we opened the Scriptures? I was listening even more intently now. I knew he was going somewhere with this, and I suspected I wasn't going to be crazy about the final destination.

"As I was talking to my wife last night," he continued. "She helped me realise where things had begun to go wrong. It's

all making sense to me now, and you really helped me put my finger on it last night, Kelly. I have been worrying about the wrong things. Being a spiritual person is the most important element of my life. I see that now. I made a decision today that I really needed to get back to my study of Scientology."

Boing! What? Are you kidding me? Scientology! I sat motionless. I did not just hear that word, did I? No. No way. Maybe he said genealogy? Or maybe…

"No," an inner voice corrected me, "you heard exactly what he said. This man just said, "Thank you, Kelly Talamo, for helping me get back to Scientology.'"

I think I am about to throw up. I simply couldn't believe my ears. This was a U-turn of epic proportions. I had never experienced anything like this before. I gathered my thoughts, righted myself as quickly as I could and tried to proceed calmly.

"Bob, time-out here a moment. I really appreciate your telling me this. But I'm just wondering why you didn't mention this last night?"

"I never thought about it last night," he answered rather coldly. "I just told you it wasn't until I talked with my wife that I realised how far I had strayed from the teachings. She reminded me that we already had what you told me about."

"Well Bob," I said, "let me ask you this. Did you get a chance to think about a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ? What do you do with what the Bible says about that?"

"Oh, I'll take a look at that at some point. But right now I realise how much ground I've lost with Scientology. My wife and I already have found something that works. And…I'll have the grilled chicken platter," he said to the waitress as he noticed

her standing there.

"Forgive me, Bob, I'm a little slow here. Help me make sense of this. If you have something that works, how come it hasn't worked?"

He didn't hesitate. "Oh, the only reason it stopped working is because we have walked away from the teachings. It's as simple as that. Aren't you going to order?"

"Yeah, give me the grilled chicken too," I told the waitress. "And water to drink. Lots of water."

I wish I could report that I changed Bob's mind during that dinner. I wish I could say that things took a better turn. They didn't. The whole meal continued in the same vein. It was like talking to a totally different person. Nothing moved him. Nothing reached him. There were no soft looks, no questions, and not one hint of personal need. It was as though a veil had been placed over his mind. Even when I reviewed some of the things we had talked about the night before, there was only a cool superficial acknowledgement of our talk. He was totally removed from that tender moment on the plane.

My heart was heavy. How could this have happened, God? What had caused such a drastic change in direction in this man's life in such a short amount of time?

I couldn't understand it. I was totally confused. What was worse, he kept on thanking me for bringing him back to his "spiritual senses."

I finally told him directly that I would never have led him to Scientology and that we were talking two totally different spiritual languages. To that he responded rather coolly, and with some assurance he informed me that the direction he had chosen was definitely best for him.

"I'm spiritually awake again," he said.

No, he hadn't become spiritually awake. Actually he was sound asleep. Finally the time approached for me to shake off the dust and head for my plane. Even though we continued to talk for a few minutes, this conversation was o-v-e-r.

Still, as we stood up to leave, I felt I had begun to see Bob's situation a little more clearly. Obviously, his wife had influenced him. But just as important, he had exchanged the revelation of God for the reason of man. Once that happens – once reason locks out faith – you can colour that guy gone. Unless and until God makes another move and lays another ambush, that person will continue to wander about aimlessly and well outside the secure walls of the Kingdom. You can't think your own way into the Kingdom. Entrance is by way of revelation only. No one can figure out anything on their own. Period!

As we said goodbye, I took one last shot. I emphasised to him that true satisfaction and contentment in his life would only come from a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and that, in the long run, he could count on Scientology leaving both he and his wife very empty. He just smiled, extended his hand, and thanked me.

It was like shaking the hand of a dead man.

As I watched Bob's car disappear into traffic, I didn't try to figure it all out. I just lifted him up in prayer.

And I found myself wondering, "Where was Leo when I really needed him?"

And tonight, I really did miss him.

Discussion Questions

Chapter 11 – Flight 588: What About Bob?

1. Has anything like this ever happened to you? Talk about that.
2. How can someone be so receptive one day and so cold less than 24 hours later?
3. Does the time on the plane with Bob now seem to be wasted?
4. Did Kelly miss the real opportunity with Bob on the plane?
5. Comment on this statement. "Bob exchanged the revelation of God for the reason of man." Is the Christian faith based on reason or revelation? What's the difference?
6. Should Kelly have been more sympathetic and respectful toward Bob's move back toward Scientology? Isn't that better than having no faith at all?
7. On a scale of 1-10 (10 = high rank), rank your knowledge of cults.

chapter 12

how are you?

Ever find yourself living life in a hurry?

I certainly do.

Why is that? Do we really accomplish more? Well, even though we may offer endless justifications for moving so fast, I really wonder if we actually get more done. The problem is, it certainly appears that we accomplish more, and perhaps the appearance itself is enough motivation to keep our hamster-on-a-wheel imitation alive and kicking.

One particular autumn day I was in a real big hurry. I was so into being in a hurry that I even hesitated to stop for petrol. That detail could have messed up my whole morning. But as the warning light on the car's instrument panel stared me down, I knew I couldn't put it off any longer. Reluctantly I gave

in and pulled into one of the many Quick Trip convenience stores in our area.

For the most part, I usually enjoy the Quick Trip stop. These places were created for guys like me. Here's a spot where you can fill up your car, grab a snack, check your messages, make copies, refill your supersized 1.5 litre drink for only one dollar, send a fax, and read the front page of USA Today, all at practically the same time. Why, you don't even need cash! Plastic works really well. And when I pull off so many little details in less than 10 minutes, then, hey, call me efficient!

But on this particular day, there was no time for all of the extras. It was a gas-only, no-frills kind of stop. Working the pump, I gave a quick glance toward the inside of the store. What I saw was a horror sight for a guy in a hurry. A line! I couldn't believe it.

Not a line at a time like this, I thought. What am I going to do? I can't wait in a line. That's impossible. I've got to be somewhere in 10 minutes, and that somewhere is 15 minutes from here.

Getting anxious, I began to think creatively. (Exhausted options are fertile ground for creativity.) Soon, I had my answer. "I know what I'll do," I thought, dipping into my pocket to check cash reserves. There it was – a crisp ten-dollar bill.

"Yeah, that's it. I'll pump exactly ten dollars petrol, go right into the store and approach the line. Then, I'll walk right up to the front and say, 'Ten dollars on pump two.' Then I'll drop the ten on the counter and off I'll go."

"Yeah, that's it. I've done it before. People understand guys like me. Why, the only reason anyone would get mad is if they didn't think of it themselves, or didn't have the exact change to

pull it off. Yeah, that's what I'll do."

As the pump hit exactly ten dollars, I smiled. My calculations and plans were working perfectly. Bingo! I'm a wizard!

Replacing the pump and jogging toward the store, I burst through the door – but to my utter amazement the line I had dreaded had somehow disappeared. There were people, but no line.

"Wow," I thought, "this is going to be even easier than I figured." I moved quickly to the counter and whipped out my ten, ready to drop it and run off as planned. My only obstacle now was the checkout girl and she didn't appear to be a problem.

Leaning toward her with the ten in my hand, I prepared to execute the quick drop and rapid escape. But before the bill could hit the counter I was stopped dead in my tracks by the voice. You know the voice I am talking about. His voice. The still, small voice of the Holy Spirit.

"Time out!" the voice said.

Have you ever noticed how quick the Holy Spirit is? Let me put it this way. Light travels at about 300,000 kilometres per second. That's seven-and-a-half times around the earth in one second. Pretty fast, right?

Yes, that's very fast, unless you compare it to the speed of the Holy Spirit. He can say more in a half second than I can think in an hour. But the volume of words is not the problem. It's the velocity and impact of the words that gets to you. They penetrate. And penetration is the real issue. What the Holy Spirit says is crystal clear and very direct. It's also extremely personal and cuts right to the heart.

As the ten-dollar bill moved from my pocket to the counter, this is what I heard: "Kelly, what are you doing? What is so important that you have to be moving so fast? Where are you going? Is this a way of life you've learned from me? Aren't you missing something here?"

Five penetrating questions in rapid-fire order and all in less than a second. Every one of them worthy of an answer that I didn't have. By the time my ten-dollar bill reached the girl's hand my whole thought process had changed. When my mindset changed, something else changed with it. My perspective. The woman at the counter had been suddenly transformed from an obstacle to an opportunity.

Her countenance didn't tell it all, but it said enough. She appeared to be a woman with a lot of needs. Let me put it this way. If there had been a stamp on her forehead indicating her state it would have read in big bold letters – P-A-I-N.

As her hand reached toward the outstretched ten-dollar bill, I held onto it for an extra second as we mad direct eye contact.

"How are you?" I asked with a surprising feeling of concern – concern that had been put there only a second ago before by the Holy Spirit.

"How am I?" she answered. "Look at me. I'm overweight. I sit in this boring cage all day long. I hate this job, and…and… my husband left me earlier this week. That's how I am. How are you?"

(Clearly, "How are you?" is a powerful question when you ask it as if you want to know).

Disconcerted at first, but quickly realising that the Holy Spirit was now in control, I managed an answer: "Do you know that Jesus Christ can turn that around for you?"

She didn't hesitate. With a dead seriousness she asked what I thought was both a powerful and legitimate question: "Will He bring my husband back?"

I didn't hesitate a moment because the presence of the Holy Spirit breeds confidence and discernment. "I don't know if He'll bring your husband back. But I do know that He can put you in a place where you're better able to understand and cope with what's happening in your life. We all would like to change something in our lives, but some things don't change right away. For that matter, they may not change at all. But God is aware of your situation and I do know that only He can give you peace in the midst of your problems. Right now it looks like peace is what you need regardless of what happens with your husband. Am I on the right track?"

I find it's always important to check with a person to be sure that the words I'm throwing out are really sinking in. Apparently they were because she nodded in silent agreement.

"Would you be open to reading something if I brought it to you?" I continued.

"Yes, I would. I would like that. I really do need something."

She then managed a faint smile as I bid her a good day.

The next day I dropped off some materials to her. She wasn't in at the time, but the attendant on duty assured me that she would give the materials to her. Two days later she was gone from that job, and so were the materials I had left for her.

I never saw the young woman again.

Discussion Questions

Chapter 12 – How Are You?

1. Can you picture yourself doing what Kelly did in this story?
2. When does "How are you?" become a powerful question?
3. Have you seen a young woman similar to the one at the Quick Trip lately? When you see them, do you ever think that perhaps God sent you there?
4. Do you have many encounters with "The Voice"? Can you cite an instance when "The Voice" turned you around?
5. Do you think Kelly said enough to the young woman? Too much?
6. How much did the S.O.S. principle relate to this story?
7. Share your thoughts on Matthew 11:28-30.

chapter 13

zeal without a clue

Zeal. What is it anyway?

You know it when you see it, but could you describe it if you had to? When you encounter a zealous person, what effect does he or she have on you? Is it positive, negative, challenging or engaging?

Zealous people are easy to spot. They're passionate. A quick look into their eyes reveals both focus and fire. They seem to be connected to something that for them is a gut-level high priority. They're intense people on a mission and high commitment is their standard operating procedure.

Zealous people take action. They're not just thinkers, they're doers. And if you spend much time with them you just might find yourself doing what they're doing. Zealots tend to recruit

others to their cause.

Now make no mistake about it, zeal definitely comes with some perks. For starters, it motivates. It gets people going. Zealous passion can serve as a catalyst to move from thought to action.

It also helps one enthusiast connect with others. Zealous people run with zealous people. Whatever the cause, they're seldom alone and the collective energy of a zealous group can get them through the mundane tasks, keeping them focused on the mission ahead.

Zeal also excites. Fuel is to a rocket, as passion is to the zealot. Their motivation and excitement are contagious. They seem to be people who are literally on fire.

But with all that zeal adds, it does have at least one shortfall – a potentially fatal flaw. Without a proper perspective, zeal can become a substitute for knowledge.

Granted, zealous passion may indeed launch you into new arenas with great fervour. In fact, before you know it, you may be leading a charge of your own. But be very careful if you find yourself losing sight of your ultimate goal as you ride zeal's strong emotional crest. Discipline yourself to become suspicious the moment you sense yourself being carried off by intense emotion. You may just find yourself hitting the wall at high velocity!

I hit such a wall on a warm and humid July night as Mary and I were returning from a Bible study near our home in South Louisiana. This wasn't just any study, but a study on the End Times. The discussion had centred on the events leading to the Second Coming of Christ, as described in the classic book by Hal Lindsey, The Late Great Planet Earth.

Mary and I were two brand-new believers with a fresh love for Jesus Christ. With white-hot hearts we soaked up any and all information about God we could find. Whenever possible we sought out opportunities to drink our fill of this new and exciting life, and this night was no exception.

In fact, tonight was something special. This End Times information we had heard involved high-octane, cutting-edge, radically spiritual scoop. This was divine data on how the world would end, who wins the last big war, and what happens to the planet's few remaining inhabitants. In a sense this was "mission impossible" material with a spiritual twist and we wanted in before the whole place self-destructed.

If the theological implications weren't enough, there was the added drama of linking Bible prophecy to the daily newspaper. For the first time in human history the stage seemed to be set for humanity's final moments. Like many of those studying this material, we felt that we were among the select few who were being introduced to these mind-shattering truths. We sensed we were on the inside looking out at what was really happening in the world.

There was so much to discuss as we drove home that night. The Antichrist was soon to be revealed, a New World Order was forming, and soon (perhaps even tomorrow!) we would all be asked to wear that dreaded mark of the beast! Mary and I were so captivated by these new thoughts and so caught up in future possibilities that we could scarcely think about anything else.

We also experienced other emotions besides excitement. Our new perspective on the culmination of human history caused us to feel a burden for those who didn't know what we

knew about the End Times. We wondered:

"What about our families? What about our lost friends? What would happen to them if we were suddenly 'raptured'? What could we do for them now? What could we say that would help them see what we saw?"

These people must know! We need to get the word out now! We were constantly stirred by a newfound sense of urgency towards the world around us. (An urgency, by the way, that's very biblical).

Such was our mood as we drove home through the night. Thought-provoking questions raced back and forth between Mary and me. Each new thought raised another new question. It seemed we could talk all night. We were on what you might call "a spiritual roll".

But before long, our magical moment was interrupted by a seemingly insignificant physical need. The petrol gauge was sitting on empty. It was getting late into the evening, in fact close to midnight, and we still had more than 50 kilometres to drive.

Though I hated to suspend our discussion and stop for what seemed like such a triviality, I couldn't risk running out of petrol. Anxious to keep our conversation alive, we decided to handle this in an Indy 500 pit-stop fashion. Mary would run in to pay while I manned the nozzle and pumped. If everything worked right, we'd be back on the road in less than five minutes.

But in the rush, I had forgotten one thing – God often seems to combine my need for petrol with my need to take another step in my spiritual growth.

In any event, I was oblivious. While filling the tank that

night I can remember gazing up at the sky and wondering, "How soon will it be until the Lord returns? When exactly will all of this commotion we are learning about finally take place?"

We were told that "no one knew the day or the hour." But as I stared at the stars above, I could picture it happening at that very moment. In fact, the sky seemed poised for a breakthrough of His presence.

"Could it possibly be right now?" I gulped! Yes, that's the whole point. It could be right now!

Captured by that right-now thought, I whispered softly, "Yes, come now, Lord Jesus!"

I paused and allowed the thoughts of His imminent return to deeply warm me as I went about my simple task of pumping gas.

As I was finishing I noticed a young man crouching down at the next set of pumps. His back was to me but I could see that he was putting some gas into a red 20-litre jerry can. His position kept me from seeing his face as I continued to study him while he went about his business. I began to imagine this man in light of all that we were learning about the End Times.

I wondered where he stood spiritually and what he knew about these last days that were moving us toward Armageddon. My mind was, needless to say, in high gear as I placed this young fellow and myself at the centre of the cosmic drama that was unfolding.

"Who exactly is this guy," I thought. He's all alone at this isolated station. Where does he stand spiritually?

"I bet this poor guy has no idea about all that's happening out there in the world around him. He doesn't know that, as we stand here at these pumps, a one-world government is

forming. He probably doesn't know that very soon he may never eat a meal or receive any civil service unless he bears the 'mark of the beast.' Why, unless he submits, he will starve to death!

"Worse than that, he probably doesn't know that the very sky above him is poised to explode with the impending return of Jesus Christ. He may not be ready. And if he's not ready, he'll be lost forever. Why, he doesn't have a clue! This man is going to hell right before my very eyes! I've got to do something!"

By now my heart was high in my throat. "How could he even bear to live?" I asked myself. "What keeps him going?"

I could hardly contain myself. I decided this was no accident that this man is here, right now. The question was not if I should share, but what to share.

I hardly hesitated on the question, "Is this the right moment?"

Instead, I quickly answered my own questions: "This is no time to wonder. What's there to wonder about? I know the truth, he doesn't. Here I am and there he is. So what's the holdup?"

The zeal to share was gaining momentum and my conviction about his spiritual dilemma was all-consuming – even though I didn't know a thing about him. I immediately began to move toward him.

As I moved closer I was aware enough of my surroundings to notice vaguely that there wasn't a car near the man. That fact, coupled with the sight of the guy pumping gas into a 20-litre jerry can, might have strongly suggested to most people that he had run out of petrol.

But this cognitive observation didn't register or slow me

down one bit. Proceeding straight toward him I asked the Lord for power: "Let him see the truth as I open my mouth, Lord. Let him see the truth tonight."

Perhaps, approaching the fellow from the rear was not the best idea. Perhaps, my confidence was too much for him to grasp. Perhaps, in the heat of the moment, I skipped some critical steps that usually go along with meeting someone for the first time.

I have to admit that the young man seemed less than excited about my abrupt invasion into his life.

"Excuse me," I began loudly and aggressively as I approached him in his crouched position.

Obviously startled, he quickly turned his head and made direct eye contact with me.

Without hesitation I continued: "Sir, do you realise that Jesus Christ is just about to break through the heavens? And when he does, He's going to torch this place?"

Momentarily stunned and without moving a muscle, he sheepishly replied, "Why, uh…no!"

"Well, He is," I continued, "and when He does, He's going to completely destroy all of this, create a new heaven and a new earth and take only the believers out of here with him."

Then, with a particularly stern look, I added a zinger: "You had better be ready. It could be tonight."

Totally dazed, the man never moved a muscle. He didn't flinch. He didn't even blink. He simply stared up at me in amazement. The man was speechless.

I sealed my momentous message with the most piercing look that I could muster. Without another word I turned and headed back to my car.

"Boy," I thought, "am I glad I had that opportunity. What would have happened to that guy, if I hadn't come along?"

Sliding behind the wheel I gave him one more glance. He still hadn't moved. "Yes!" I thought. "This guy is touched!"

Mary had finished her mission and was now waiting for me in the car. We were well under our five-minute time frame.

She had seen me speaking to the young man while she was still in the station and as we exited the station she asked, "Kelly, what did you say to that guy back there?"

"Well, I told him that Jesus Christ was about to come back and torch the place and he had better be ready."

Looking somewhat surprised, she paused for a moment. Then she asked, "Well, did you tell him how to be ready?"

That stopped me. I drove on in silence for a moment or two. Did she say "how"? The word hit me like a brick. HOW? It hit me again. She had said it so softly, but now it was ringing all too loudly in my mind. The word was pounding me like a huge church bell at high noon, over and over again. HOW? HOW? HOW?

Finally I returned to my senses and glanced over at her, searching for something that might seem to be a decent, intelligent answer.

"Well, no, I didn't exactly tell him how to get ready for the end of the world," I finally muttered weakly.

Not exactly? Who are you kidding, Kelly? Telling him how to receive Christ hadn't even crossed my mind! Oh God, what had I done?

What I had done was just dump the entire Second Coming of Jesus Christ on a total stranger without warning. There was no warm-up. There was no concern for his physical need.

There was no attempt to establish a relationship. I had engaged in a bout of theological clubbing, ugly evangelistic mauling. It was spiritual brutality at its worst and the poor guy didn't have a chance.

I don't think I've ever felt lower as a Christian. I was sick to my stomach. During the rest of the drive home I lapsed into a mental fog, constantly replaying my lack of discernment.

The more I reflected, the worse it looked. I didn't like what I had done. I didn't like my zeal. I didn't like me.

Moreover, I felt even worse for that poor guy who had sat there pumping petrol into his little can. My fervour had caused me to leave a total stranger alone in the dark with an empty petrol tank and probably an empty spirit.

This personal pity party went on for about ten minutes. Mary finally managed to talk me out of it and we were able to pray. Prayer brought some peace and I found I was able to leave my zealous mistake with God.

What happened to that guy? Where is he now? Did I ruin his entire week? Did he get angry because I hadn't even offered to drive him to his car? I certainly would have been upset.

Most important, had my actions – as a fire-breathing zealot – turned him off for all time to the Gospel?

Good questions that warranted some real reflection on my part. But I became convinced that the answer to that last question was "No". I didn't mess up God's plan. The completion of God's plan never rises or falls on my cleverness or tact. If it did, God would be in trouble.

Obviously, I didn't participate in this particular ambush as I should have. But I also know I didn't thwart God's ultimate purpose. For me – and probably others – that's very

encouraging. Remember, it's God's ambush, not mine nor yours.

Since that hot, humid, frustrating summer night in South Louisiana, I've encountered several other people who were in very similar situations. They too had run out of petrol and needed a little assistance.

What did I do? How did I handle those encounters?

First I paused and prayed. That in itself always gave me a fresh perspective and made the next step a lot easier. Then, approaching slowly, I smiled and asked, "Can I give you a hand?"

Sometimes they said yes, and at times that positive response led to other conversations. Sometimes they said no and that was fine too. I just turned away and proceeded about my business.

But no matter what the response, being a little careful and trying to be sensitive to the particular person's needs always seems to work a lot better than having zeal without a clue.

Discussion Questions

Chapter 13 – Zeal Without A Clue

1. Have you ever done anything like this?
2. What do you think God thinks about the way Kelly handled that guy that night?
3. Would it have been better if Kelly didn't say anything at all?
4. Are you more like Kelly or Mary in this story? Explain.
5. Should thinking about the end times move us to that kind of action? How often do you think or talk about the end times?
6. Hebrews 10:24-25 tells us to do something. What is it? What Day is the author talking about in that verse?

chapter 14

bumper bites

Bumper stickers crack me up. Think about it. With a short, carefully worded phrase, a driver can put an entire ideology on display.

The scope and range of subject are as varied as the cars that carry them. You'll read anything from "One Way" to "No Fear".

The sticker can reveal personal facts ("Mom's Taxi") or a sense of humour ("Mafia Staff Car"). It can boast about the driver's loves ("I love…My Husband, My Wife, Fishing or Beagles") or hates ("Pro-Choice", "No Nukes", or "Don't Blame Me, I Voted for Bush").

Although bumper stickers are very common, I hesitate to label them insignificant. Consider the potential impact of that rapid visual encounter.

Over in the next lane, a total stranger can give you a high-speed entrée right into his or her value system. With one quick glance, in less than five seconds, you can develop an affinity or an animosity toward someone you've never met. All of this from a totally silent bumper bite at 90 kilometres an hour.

Does a simple bumper sticker often imply something deeper? Was the driver in front of you thinking "ultimate purpose" or "meaning of life" when he or she placed that slice of personal thinking on display for anyone who is tailgating – or anyone who happens to get cut off?

Just as important, is it really that important for people to let others know exactly what they believe?

Maybe it is that important for some people. After all, the purpose of a bumper sticker is identification. There's a personal profile going out and a message being sent.

Sometimes the message provokes thought ("Visualise World Peace"), while others may only provoke (_____ Happens!, "Pro-Choice" or "Pro-Life").

But make no mistake, there's always a real person behind every sticker. To me, the most interesting people seem to be those with stickers that revolve around the environment or ecology. These people enjoy saving things. It could be whales, seals, eagles or owls. It could be rivers, lakes, redwoods or rainforest. It could be something very furry or anything green. But if it's alive and in trouble, these people enjoy a rescue.

They also like to hug things even if they can't hug back (or because they can't hug back). "Hug A Tree", "Hug A Moose", and "Rock Hugger" are just a few of the stickers I've read recently.

These folks interest me because they usually appear serious

as I drive past them. They're pensive and determined. Their world is the environment. They like it nice and clean, and don't want other people messing it up.

So what about Christians? We like our environment nice too, don't we? We like our world a certain way and don't want non-Christians messing it up. But that attitude can get a little messy if we start trying to shout and scream from our bumpers at those who see the world differently from us.

That brings me to a basic point for believers: Do bumper stickers enhance our evangelical witness? Can these paper proclamations be effective tools to win people to Christ? Should I even consider using my rear bumper as a mobile pulpit?

Let's get specific. When people read, "Jesus, The Only Way," do they ever pull over at the next exit and repent?

Perhaps.

But probably not any more than those who respond to "Lose Weight Now, Ask Me How." In fact, I'll bet that "spiritual stickers" often do more for the drivers who post them than for the people who read them.

But that's not to say that a bumper bite can't affect a stranger, or even ambush him – so long as some basic rules of good spiritual communication are observed.

For one thing, a visual word may at least cause someone to stop and think. If "faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God," someone could indeed be encouraged to believe for the first time by reading God's Word on the rear end of your car.

But it's also important to help the person understand that the car they're following is actually being driven by a Christian

and not by some guy that just wants to shove a spiritual message in their face.

To begin with, remember that Jesus encouraged us to "let our light shine before men so that they may see our good works and glorify our Father who is in heaven". So your driving can be a visual extension of your personality in Christ. Your speed, your passing style, and even your way of making left and right turns should each be a "good work" that coincides with the "good word" they may have just read on your bumper. Hellish driving can destroy a heavenly message.

So if you want to display a short salvation message, go ahead. But don't bother preaching Christian behaviour to a non-Christian audience. Spiritually, they can't comprehend it. Even if they could, they don't have the power to pull it off without Jesus. Judging or criticising the behaviour of others will usually just alienate you from those you're trying to reach. Non-Christians can only behave like non-Christians. Your bumper sticker doesn't have the power to change how people act before Jesus first changes their heart and spirit.

Finally, if you want to reach people and use your car to do it, be sure your message is "gentle" – as in, "A gentle answer turns away wrath" (Proverbs 15:1). In other words, if you're into bumper stickers, drive carefully. It may take the bite out of your bumper. That way, your message has a better chance to stick.

Discussion Questions

Chapter 14 – Bumper Bites

1. Are bumper-sticker people really trying to make a statement? Is there an identity going out? Can you pick up on a person's value system from a bumper bite?
2. Do you have a bumper sticker? What does it say? Why did you put it on?
3. Share your thoughts about Christian symbols altogether (the Christian Fish on a car or business card or a cross around your neck).
4. Do you think our symbols are effective with the non-Christian?
5. What do you think Jesus means in Matthew 5:13-16?

chapter 15

loving your job

Do you love your job? Now stop and think about that question very carefully. Do you really love that segment of your time you spend at work?

What are your thoughts about where you go and what you do on a typical Monday morning? Would you rather be going somewhere else or doing something else? Statistics tell us that 70 percent of people don't like their jobs. That's sad. But worse yet, half of that 70 percent actually say that they hate their work. Now that's tragic.

Considering that we spend over a third of our adult life working, shouldn't our occupation be something we love and not despise?

Shouldn't our chosen earthly task mesh nicely with the way

God created us?

Isn't a job supposed to be a divine blend of God-given skills, talents, and creativity mixed with our own personal dreams and interests? I think it is.

Furthermore, I'm convinced that when that right mix is both discovered and developed, it not only brings a new dimension of personal fulfilment into one's life, but it also establishes a person on a powerful and magnetic platform – a platform that becomes a showcase where God is displayed and draws others to Himself.

But let me offer a few words of caution.

First, this story is about much more than making you feel totally satisfied with your work. Work is, and always will be, W-O-R-K. God has commanded us to work, and He made it very clear that "the sweat of our brow" will accompany the effort. That's a given.

So get over any illusions on this score! If the hard work or drudgery of a job could be changed, then I would have been the first to learn how to find an easier way! The "sweat of the brow" part is not an option. So be on guard. Any continued attempt to dodge the sweat part may just become a futile and vicious circle that eventually buries you spiritually.

A second word of caution: This story is not about what kind of work you do. That really doesn't matter. Your ultimate sense of significance or value in life will never be found in the type of work that you do.

Plumbers and heart surgeons are on equal footing with God when it comes to their chosen tasks. Faucets are fixed only to leak again. And the most skillful transplants and bypasses only serve to prolong the patient's life. Eventually every patient still

dies. Sorry, Doc!

Third word of caution: This story is about how you do what you've decided to do. But I'm not just talking about the skill of your tasks, which of course is critically important. Rather, I want to address the passion you display whenever and wherever you perform your work.

A high level of skill, delivered with genuine passion and inner contentment, becomes a very dynamic and noticeable combination in today's bottom-line, climb-fast, me-first marketplace. The consistent presence of these two components – skill and passion – will almost always be very attractive to those you come into contact with at work. This includes the people you serve (your customers and employers), those who serve you (your vendors), and those with whom you serve (your co-workers). In short, you are always playing to a packed house and you want to influence positively every segment of your audience.

In recent years, I've had the good fortune to branch out professionally to become a consultant in team-building for various major corporations. As I play to my own packed houses, I want my audience to love my performance and go away with useful information that will help them improve their own performance on the job.

At least that's what I always tell people.

But I wasn't feeling like a prime-time performer on one particularly cold and nasty December day in northern Michigan. It was the kind of weather that made me wonder, "Why in the world am I doing this? I'm 700 miles from sunshine and family."

As I approached my destination, I was on the verge of

letting these and other complaints take over. A quick talk with God reminded me that this job is not only what I prayed for but what He had created me to do. In an effort to counter the emerging negativism, I bowed my head and quickly tried to adjust my heart as I arrived on the site.

One of my clients who owns a series of coating plants had called and asked me to facilitate a team-building session for the 10-member office staff in Grand Blanc, Michigan. Our program that day focused on working relationships. In this session, participants discover and explore the strengths and weaknesses of each person present.

Following this discovery, we demonstrate how a proper understanding of one another is a vital component in working together effectively and maintaining solid relationships while we're at work. This can be a rich and revealing session – so long as the consultant (in this case, Kelly Talamo) can stay positive.

Watching for an answer to my prayer for an elevated mood, I quickly saw God's response as I began to interact with the group. My attention focused on one particularly interested member, the company office manager who was easy to remember for three reasons.

First of all, her name was Kelli (a great name – one I could hardly forget!). Second, she was a teacher's dream because she paid very close attention. And third, she was to be married the next day.

Though naturally quiet and reserved, Kelli's above-average interest in the material was very apparent from the outset. As we moved through the strengths and weaknesses of each personality, it was obvious that she was processing the material with something more than just the office staff in mind.

Not only was she learning about herself and her teammates, but she was also learning more about the man she was to marry in less than 30 hours. I couldn't always tell exactly what she was thinking but there was obviously a lot on her mind, which ventured well beyond the confines of the office.

As we were leaving late that afternoon, Kelli peppered me with a series of great questions and commented how she wished that we had more time to explore them. She felt as though we had just gotten started and, all of a sudden, the session was over. She also mentioned, as I had suspected, that she could see a lot of her fiancé in the material we had covered.

I didn't probe because I couldn't tell if that was good or bad. But she was clearly excited, if not a little perplexed, as she quickly scooted away for the evening to complete her wedding plans. Watching her disappear into the evening, I found that my heart went out to her in a special way that I could only attribute to a nudging from God.

First, I sensed that she didn't know the Lord and I wanted to talk to her more about spiritual things. I also wondered if she understood the magnitude of the step that she would be taking the following day as she walked down the aisle. Does anyone?

I could only lift her up in prayer and leave her future with the Lord. But I can remember how my heart went out – and how I wanted to say more – as she drove away toward another chapter in her life.

Our session at the company offices that day had been in preparation for some future team-training at the plant. We were due to continue with the training in about a month, but because of conflicts it was more than a year before I actually returned.

When I finally called to re-schedule the training, Kelli answered the phone. I told her I remembered her, because of her great name and because of the fact that she was getting married the next day (people appreciated being remembered). There was no time to find out how her life was going, but I expected that when I began to spend time with her team there would be an opportunity to learn more. My premonition turned out to be more on target than I had imagined.

Our team training began the following week, and Kelli was attentive as ever. I was to be there for 10 weeks straight, but Kelli had questions that would not wait that long.

Our first session consisted of a provocative exercise that taught the value of working together and closed with a look at each person's personal purpose on the job.

A close look at the purpose forces the worker to answer the question, "Why are we here?"

This exercise is an unusually strong tool for clarifying deep motivations, and which may reach well beyond occupational concerns. As a result, most people find they aren't at ease with the question at first. Probing beneath the surface and challenging superficial thinking can be extremely unsettling. So some participants simply decide not to ask or answer that question. To them, ignorance is bliss.

Not Kelli. She was eating this up. She left the session with a full notebook, a big smile, and great anticipation of the next week.

The second week was no exception. Kelli seemed to hang on every word. For a teacher that was as satisfying as it gets. As the class cleared and I was preparing to leave, Kelli came up to talk.

"How's it going?" I asked.

"Fine. I really enjoyed today."

"Great, Kelli. What in particular was good for you?"

"Everything," she said without hesitation. "I really enjoy your presentations. They're so positive!"

I paused and smiled at her compliment – and silently thanked God for His answer to my prayers against my initial negativism a year ago.

"I'm glad this is helping you," I finally replied as I waited for her to say more. She was lingering as she watched me gather the last of my things and it seemed as though she might have another question. Quietly, however, she made her way back to her desk.

Closing my briefcase, I grabbed my laptop and headed for the door. My plane left in two hours and I was 90 minutes from the airport. My mind was on home and not much else at that moment. But Kelli's desk was on the way out, so I paused briefly to see if there was another question she might have.

"Kelli, was there something else you wanted to ask me?"

With some relief, as though she had been waiting for me to ask, she answered, "Yes, there is. I was watching you today and I really loved what I saw. You're really into this. It shows. I love what you're about. It's great. I want what you have."

Taken by surprise – ambushed, if you will – I paused. I knew enough about her now to understand that she usually chose her words carefully. Her comments were more than compliments and had been offered with considerable thought. As bright and cheerful as she could be, Kelli was also a cautious individual and candour did not come easy for her.

I sensed that she might have surprised herself as she stood waiting for my reply. I treasured the moment as I formed my response. I was not only flattered but also awakened to the fact

that she was digging deep inside herself. I wanted to meet her right where she was. She had identified emptiness in her spirit and she wanted it filled. So, I proceeded with gentleness.

"Kelli, can I ask you a question?"

"Sure," she replied.

"What is it that you think I have?"

"Well, you're excited. You love what you do. I want to love what I do like that," she answered.

I thought for a moment. "Don't you like what you do?"

"Yes, but not the way you do. It's not the same. It's different. It's not like that."

I paused and sensed that God had brought her right to the door. It was obvious. Kelli was sensing something more about life – not about me. Her comments revolved around purpose and meaning. This was no time for pat answers. My job at that moment was to clarify for her what it was for which she was reaching, and to do so without moving too fast or slow for her. I chose my next words very carefully.

"Kelli, is there something else that you'd rather be doing? Would a change increase your love for your job?"

"Well, maybe," she responded with hesitation. "But I'm not quite sure that work is all there is. I really do like it here, but I think what I need is more than work…"

Now I was sure that I was being presented with an opportunity and this time I didn't hesitate.

"Kelli, what if I told you that what I have is neither external nor geographical? What would you say?"

"I don't know. What do you mean? What else is there?"

"What if I told you that what I have is something internal?" I said. "What if what you see in me is a result of something

that is inside of me?"

Partly puzzled and partly intrigued, she just stood there. I let her think about my words for a moment as I began to move toward the door. I decided to leave her with that thought to consider until our next meeting.

"Kelli, think about that this week and, if you'd like, we can talk further then."

She simply smiled and stared. And I smiled back and headed home.

I thought about her a lot that week. I also knew that this was a critical week in her thinking process. I prayed that the time away from me would pull her closer to understanding and wouldn't hinder her. Needless to say, I looked with anticipation toward my next time at the plant.

God answered. When I arrived the next week, Kelli couldn't wait for a quiet moment to talk.

"I've thought about your question all week," she said. "I think I know what you're talking about. You're talking about God aren't you?"

A little surprised that she was being so direct, I replied, "Yes. I'm talking about a relationship with God. It's not about church. I'm talking about asking God to come into your life through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and letting Him take control. I'm talking about becoming a different person internally. If that interests you, I can show you how that takes place."

She seemed receptive, so I asked, "Do you have a Bible?"

"Yes," she replied. "In fact I read it sometimes."

"Great. What exactly do you read?"

Slightly smiling, she answered, "I don't know. I just read it.

I don't know what it says really, but I just feel better after I read it. I feel happier."

Kelli had intimated that there were some tough spots in the marriage. As she put it, she just wasn't "real happy". I didn't want to see her to go to God only because she thought He would make her happy. Sometimes that doesn't happen, and I made no promises in that direction.

I did, however, want her to experience the love, joy and peace of the Holy Spirit. A certain kind of earth-bound happiness can be found in an external package. Open it up and presto, you're "happy". But true joy – a divine brand of happiness – can only be found in the package of a divine relationship. That kind of happiness comes from knowing Jesus. It's a happiness that arises from the mix of human life with His life.

As the Psalmist says, "In His presence is fullness of joy" (Psalm 16:11), and that kind of joy will leave human happiness in the dust.

Wanting her to think through seriously and precisely why she wanted to discover God, I said, "Kelli, I am going to write a note for you before I leave. What I'll ask you to do is to find an hour where you can get alone with your Bible. The note will guide you through a few Scripture verses. I'll also put some questions in there for you to ask yourself along the way. The verses will help you gain some clarity and direction."

"Don't worry about fixing anything in your life right now. Simply go to the Scriptures with the thought of meeting Jesus personally. Focus on the relationship and try not to worry about solutions. Would you do that?"

"Yes," she replied without a moment's hesitation.

Now, the ball was in my court. It was up to me to find

time to write that note before I took off for the day. My note to Kelli was brief. I first asked her to read Psalm 139 and to notice that, while still in her mother's womb, she was also in the mind of God. I knew that if she saw that, she would notice how God had been involved in her life even before it began.

I asked her then to read the John 3 encounter of Jesus and Nicodemus and to notice how this Pharisee, like many of us, wanted to start over in life. But, of course, that's impossible. When you contemplate returning to the womb, as Nicodemus did, the idea becomes ridiculous.

On the other hand, I suggested in the note, we can start our lives over by being born again in a spiritual sense. If she found that was the desire of her heart, I told her, she should simply express her feelings to God and allow Him to meet with her. See the need, see the Saviour, and connect the dots.

I stuck the note in my pocket and forgot about it as I went on about my teaching. But Kelli didn't. As I was preparing to leave, she pulled me aside.

"Do you have it?" she asked.

"Right here," I said, handing the note to her.

She clutched it tightly as if it were something precious. A simple "thank you" was all she said.

I've learned not to try to figure out how God is going to stage His final ambush in a person's life or how that person is likely to respond. There are just too many possible variations for one limited human mind to figure it all out.

Early the next week, Kelli called me on the phone to preview our coming schedule. After she covered that business rather quickly, it became obvious that she had a little more to say.

Sensing (and hoping) something had happened, and

intensely curious, I decided to probe a little before she hung up.

"Well, how are you Kelli?"

Not only was she excited but she was also crystal clear.

"I am doing great! Really great. Listen, I read the note. It was all right there. It was all so simple."

Then she paused. "Nothing has changed, yet everything has changed," she continued. "That may not make sense, but do you know what I mean?"

"Yes, I believe I do, Kelli."

She continued on. "Kelly, I'm different now. I see things. I'm…I'm whole."

And indeed she was. For the next two months I was able to spend small amounts of time with Kelli at her job. She really was different. There was a glow that had not been there previously. Her understanding and acceptance of life had been lifted into a whole new dimension.

She quickly became a woman of the Word and met weekly with an older woman for discipleship. She now shares her faith both at work and with family. She even shares her faith with her husband, who proclaims unequivocally that "There is no God."

Yet, despite these imperfections in her life's picture, it's so exciting to watch what God's doing in and through Kelli. New spiritual creatures are indeed the greatest spectacle on earth.

As I watched her rapid growth and development with awe, one thing in particular continued to stand out. In fact, I wasn't the only person to notice. It became obvious to everyone around her.

Kelli really began to love her work! Imagine that.

Discussion Questions

Chapter 15 – Loving Your Job

1. Which of the following more closely resembles your view of work?
   a. Something that gives you significance and identity.
   b. A necessary evil that gets you the things you really want (time off, toys, home, chances to minister).
   c. A platform for ministry. A place Christ can display Himself through me.
2. Do you agree with the statement that Kelly made in which he said: "Plumbers and heart surgeons are on equal footing with God?" What do you think he meant?
3. Whose ministry is more important, yours or your pastor's? (back up your view with scripture)
4. Take a look at the people around you. Do most of them love their work? What does that say to you about an opportunity?
5. Do you believe that, in the eyes of the people you work for and with, you display passion for what you do?
6. Did Kelly Talamo do anything out of the ordinary to reach Kelli?
7. Talk about Colossians 4:1 in light of this story.
8. Let's take one more look at Matthew 5:13-16. Share your thoughts.

chapter 16

careful what you pray for

Since day one of becoming a Christian, there have always been special men in my life. One of those men is my friend, Paul. Paul and I met in New Orleans while he was playing for the New Orleans Saints. We hit it off right away and, at the time of this writing, we have been very close for over 16 years. There is so much I could write about Paul. But, above all, he has always been a constant encouragement. In the 16 years that I've known him, we've probably talked on the phone a thousand times. In all of those calls, as well as I can remember, he never failed to encourage me. Now that's a friend.

One day Paul called to ask me if I would go with him on a 30-day spiritual adventure called "The Great Experiment." You know how those things go. You're up at 5:00 am, everyone reads

the same passage of Scripture, and you all pray for similar things.

It kind of reminds me of spiritual hyenas. Since we all lack courage and power on our own it helps to travel in packs. Then we all laugh at the kill when we see God move in our midst. Try it sometime. It's quite a blast.

Around day four we were on a spiritual roll. We were in the Word in the morning and on the phone with one another at night. Paul had even offered to give a wake-up call at 4:45 am.

"No thanks, Paul. Love has limits."

I can remember day four like it was yesterday. I rose at 4:45 am and went directly to the coffeepot. Then I proceeded to the wood stove and poked around until the fire was roaring and the coffee was ready. Pouring a cup, I prayerfully settled in for the morning lesson.

The Scripture selection that day was on prayer and the charge for the day was twofold:

- Serve someone by performing a good deed today.
- Ask God to allow you to share your faith today

It was quite a charge and, I decided, probably too big for God to handle that particular day in my life.

Even as I knelt to pray I remember being distracted by how much work I had to do – and how much depended on my diligence and expertise. My men and I were landscaping a large subdivision entry and I knew we were going to be pushed for time the entire day. I was committed to the spiritual program. But I was also realistic about my scheduled responsibilities.

I can remember feeling fired up as I went to the Lord that morning. The prayer itself went something like this: "God, you know my day. You know that I am already over-committed as far as time is concerned. Yet I believe you are in this spiritual

project and the request for today. So this is what I ask, God. My desire is to do a good deed today and I also want to share my faith. My request to you, Father, is that you help me conserve my valuable time and roll these two into one. Would you give me an opportunity to do a good deed and allow me to share my faith at the same time? I can see it happening as I request it, oh God, and I am excited about the way you are going to pull this off. In Jesus' name. Amen."

As I rose from my knees I could never remember being so confident of any prayer request. I don't know if it was due to the fact that I was in the Spirit. I don't know if that particular morning I possessed an especially large dose of confidence in what God was doing. I don't know if I was just caught up in the excitement of the Great Experiment. What I do know is that as I rose from my knees I could actually see God doing what I had asked of Him. I could visualise Him rolling those two actions into one without a problem.

The request seemed to be rooted in good common sense. Not only was the request spiritual but it was logical as well. You do a good deed and, as you do it, you share your faith. Simple and efficient. That would be nothing for the Creator of the universe to set up. Let's roll, Lord!

So, with special zeal and confidence I launched into my day. I left the house as a spiritual man on the move, prayed-up, and full of purpose.

At 7:30 am I greeted my men with doughnuts and a full smile. All the guys were there and the weather was perfect.

By 8:30 am we were neck-deep in trees and shrubs and moving through that entry as though we were agricultural surgeons. We were good.

Perhaps we were too good, too efficient in our own efforts. Perhaps I was too focused on the work at hand. Perhaps the subdivision entry itself was all I could see. In any event, around 10:00 am something had changed inside me.

Now how long was that? Only about four hours!

In just four hours, my focus had shifted. In just four hours, I didn't even want that for which I had just prayed for. In just four hours, my heart had hardened – or at least had made a huge detour.

Too bad, because that was just the moment when God began to answer my early morning prayer. I wish I could tell you that I didn't see the opportunity coming. I can't. This was too obvious. I recognised this as being exactly what I had prayed for. The problem was that when the opening came I simply didn't want to respond.

Here's the picture: It's just before 10:00 am and my men and I are on an amazing roll. Any landscape manager knows that you get a lot more production in the morning hours as compared to the afternoon. This morning had all the makings of a bottom-line bonanza. Plants were dropping in the holes as if they were on automatic pilot. Ring it up. We were cruising and way ahead of schedule.

This particular subdivision entry was situated right at the bottom of two hills. As we were working, I began to hear a loud popping sound coming from the top of the hill behind us. Glancing in that direction, I could see an old blue pickup truck sputtering and backfiring. This thing sounded like fireworks on the fourth of July.

Steadily, the crippled truck moved downhill in our direction. Pop, pop, smoke…then quiet…and then pop again. As the

truck sputtered, my now-selfish mind raced ahead of the action.

"That truck's in the process of breaking down," I thought to myself. "And when it does, it's going to coast until it can't coast any more. And if I'm right, gravity will leave that bomb right at the bottom of the hill, about 6 metres in front of where we're working."

It was as clear as the blue sky above me.

And the moment I made the calculation my heart began to sour.

"I don't want this to happen," I thought. "If that truck breaks down right here, then I'll have to help. I don't want to have to help this truck out. Not now. I'm finally on a roll here. This is not the time to work on trucks."

And so it went.

"But wait a minute," I reflected. "If that truck landed right in front of me, won't I be in a position to do a good deed? And might I not even be able to share Christ? And isn't this exactly what I prayed for?"

Yet, the closer the truck came, the more I resisted the thought of that opportunity.

Finally, after one loud, violent pop the truck grew quiet and began to coast. Here the thing came, right in my direction. My calculations were a little off. It didn't land 6 metres from us. It landed 4 metres away.

I was busy placing azaleas for my men to plant when the vehicle came to a complete stop. I went about my task as two young men got out of the truck and began looking under the hood.

"Sounds like the carburettor," one said as he scratched his head.

"No, I think it's the timing," replied the driver.

"The second guy's right," I said to myself. That timing is so off that the truck will never start.

I kept on with my work, never making eye contact with either of the two men. In fact, as I continued on I silently began a new prayer: "Lord, please let them get that truck started."

I meant every word.

Talk about the wrong kind of boldness! "Please help them get the truck started"?

"Are you serious Kelly?" another voice in my head said. "It's your prayers that got them here in the first place."

It was almost as though I could hear the Lord shout that back at me.

Still, my hard heart kept it up: "Please, not now Lord. I've got to finish this entry and we're doing so well right now. These guys are going to be fine Lord – aren't they?"

When God wants your attention He will stop at nothing to get it. God was more in tune to the purpose of that day than I was and He definitely had His way of letting me know it.

Wesley, my foreman, was not a man of God. He had heard me share with him and others on a number of occasions, but he would have told you himself that he did not have a saving relationship with Jesus Christ.

But, he seemed to be more in touch with God at that moment than I was. Walking over to me, he asked, "You are going to help them, aren't you boss?"

"No, Wesley," I shot back. "They'll be all right. Let's keep at this."

"Man," he replied, "that doesn't sound like you."

Ouch! That hurt. It really stings when a non-believer comments that your actions are not quite like what he is used to seeing in a Christian. But I guess his words didn't sting quite enough.

"Leave it alone Wesley," I said. "Let's get back to work."

"Okay, boss, you the man," he replied.

In the background I could hear the two men talk and tinker as they worked on the truck. "They are going to get that truck started," I kept saying to myself. "I know they will."

Ten long minutes passed. Finally, one of the men jumped into the cab and hit the key. Pop, pop, and then, Yes! They did get it started.

There was both gladness and sadness as I heard the motor crank. Finally, they're going to leave – that was my first thought. But along with that notion ran another. When they leave, I realised there goes my opportunity. I listened intently as the truck sputtered away from our job site and began the ascent up the next hill.

The sound filled me with mixed emotions. Wasn't this what I had prayed for? Hadn't God laid a great opportunity right at my feet?

Yes, to both questions. That was all I could think about as I listened to the sound of the truck grow fainter.

I sort of stood in a fog as I considered what I had just done. The fog however didn't last long.

As the truck began to pop its way up the hill, it became obvious that something was still not right with the blue bomb. In fact, at the rate the vehicle was moving it was obvious that it wasn't going to make it all the way up. And the pickup would probably fail to clear the crest of the hill.

Oh no, I thought, it's coming back down. That truck is going to die near the top of the hill, and when it does, it will have to roll backward. And then it's going to land about 4 metres in front of us again.

This time I was more accurate. Here it came and there it landed. And now two very frustrated men got out and began the tinkering process all over again.

Wesley made another pass at me: "Boss, you know what they need is a chain and a tow."

"No, I think they'll fix it, Wes. Leave it alone!"

Funny how hardness breeds more hardness. Here before me was something rare. Here was a second chance. How many times do you get a second chance at the same opportunity? Especially in the spiritual realm!

I don't know what finally turned things around for me. I don't know if I was tired of looking at the truck or tired of Wesley's questions. I'm not sure if it was the press of the Spirit or the disappointed look in Wesley's eyes.

But finally it registered that there was something that I, as a Christian who claimed to love God, needed to do. Not because I felt like it, but because it was right. It came down to simple obedience.

The funny thing about the whole process, though, was that as I began to move in obedience I also began to enjoy the moment.

I started by approaching the two men in total humility. "Listen, guys," I said. "I need to say something to the both of you. Would you mind?"

"No, go ahead," they said, looking at one another.

"Thanks, guys. You see, I really should have helped you 20 minutes ago. In my prayer time this morning I asked the Lord

to allow me to help someone and here you came. But, when you arrived I was too busy and concerned with myself to help you. Would you two please forgive me?"

They guys simply stared at me in utter amazement. "Sure, man, no problem," one of the men managed to mumble.

"Thank you," I replied. "Now let's get you two going. I have a chain. One of you get in your cab and the other ride with me to show me where we need to go."

Curiously, both men leaned towards their cab.

"It doesn't matter to me but let's move," I continued.

Quickly, we hooked my truck to theirs and off we went. The young man seated with me said that we needed to go about three kilometres up the road. Three kilometres…at about 30 kilometres per hour. That gives us about 10-15 minutes together. I asked the man his name.

"Johnny," he said.

"Johnny, what's going on in your life right now?" I asked.

Johnny wasted no time. "Man, my life is a mess. You see, I like to play music and I'm out three nights a week playing music. I love it. I don't make much money, so I have to work days too. It's hard and my new wife is tired of it already."

"How long have you been married?" I asked.

"Less than a year," he replied.

"She expects me to be home every night," he continued. "It's really hard right now because I do want to play the drums and it seems like my wife is fighting me. I don't know what I am going to do."

Now I began to get my footing with him. "Well, Johnny, can I ask you a question?"

"Sure," he replied.

"If I could show you a way that you could be sure you were making the right decision, would you be interested?"

"Of course," he answered.

"Well, the first thing in a marriage is to make sure that your foundation is solid. The foundation needs to be a spiritual one. Do you believe that?"

"Yes," he answered.

"Well, where are you in your relationship to God?" I asked.

After a very short pause, he blurted, "Man, I can't believe you are asking me about this. You see, my sister is one of those born-again Christians and she has been telling me this for over a year. She is trying to get me to go to church and turn my life over to God. I can't believe you're saying this."

I wasn't surprised. "Well Johnny, your sister loves you. She is only telling you the truth. You can't be totally content until your trust and your hope are in Jesus Christ. Once you are grounded in Him then you can make your decisions from a solid foundation. It doesn't mean that everything will go right or that you will always make the perfect decision. But you will have a sense of pleasing God and not just satisfying yourself or your wife. It brings a new perspective into your decision-making process. Can you see that?"

"I think I do," he replied.

"Well, Johnny, give a new ear to what your sister is saying. Take a look at the claims of Jesus Christ and look to Him before you make your next move."

He nodded in affirmation.

Soon we were there. We left the truck and greeted his friend.

"How did it go back there?" I asked him.

"Great," his friend replied. "Thank you so much for the tow."

"No," I replied as I extended my hand. "I thank you for allowing me to help even though I waited so long to act."

The two men just shook their heads as I walked away from them.

It was a simple but humbling encounter. Two men on their way home and two men needing help. Two lost men.

And what did it take to help them? It took exactly 30 minutes, a chain, some simple obedience and the decision to adjust my own selfish schedule.

When I arrived back at the job site, Wesley was waiting with a big smile. "Get 'em straightened out, boss?" he asked.

"Yeah, Wesley, I got 'em straightened out. So how's it going here?"

"Man, we handled it, take a look."

And handle it they did. The section we were working on was totally completed, the work was excellent, and they were waiting for further instructions. If they had missed or needed me at all, it surely didn't show. We finished the entry by 3:00 pm.

Matthew 6:33 says this. "Seek ye first His Kingdom and His righteousness and all these other things will be added onto you."

I guess God really does mean "all these other things," doesn't He?

Discussion Questions

Chapter 16 – Careful What You Pray For

1. Do you think the truck breaking down was a direct answer to prayer?
2. What happened to Kelly between his quiet time and the time the truck arrived?
3. Have you ever been put in your "spiritual place" by an unbeliever?
4. What do you think about the second chance that Kelly got? Have you had one like this? Can we count on getting them?
5. Read Matthew 6:33. What do you think Jesus means in this verse? Why don't we believe it?

family ties

You are about to enter a section of stories that deal with me sharing Christ in the context of my immediate family.

Is sharing Christ with your immediate family easier or more difficult than sharing with friends or strangers?

The vast majority of people I've talked to about this subject say that it is much more difficult for them to share Christ in the context of their immediate family than any other arena.

Why is that? Shouldn't it be easier than sharing with friends or strangers?

Perhaps. But the truth is that the cross and its message divides; and no more so than in the family.

No matter where I go, people ask me more questions about how to reach their family members than any others in their life.

I'm touched. It shows that people care about their families.

As you move through this section, remember that Jesus Christ wants to reach your family members more than you do. No matter how dark the situation may appear to the human eye, no one is beyond the reach of God (He got to you and I, didn't He?).

Also, remember that the principles for reaching family members are the same as for every other lost person. You must stay in the Spirit, love them while you have the chance, and leave the end results in the hand of a loving God. He can and will have His way in their lives.

Discussion Questions

Family Ties

1. Do you think it is more difficult sharing Christ in your immediate family than with friends, co-workers and strangers? If so, why do you think that's true?
2. Describe what it's like in your immediate family. How many are Christians?
3. Do you pray for your immediate family on a regular basis?
4. Right now, are you encouraged or discouraged about the way God seems to be moving in your family?

chapter 17

tough cookie

Childhood memories. Is there anything like them? Hardly. And it seems that the more people you have around your home the more memories there are to relive.

Our home was always full of people. With six children, including a set of twins, the action and pace kept Mom busy and Dad working most of the time. Yet, the large family was great fun for all of us.

I was the oldest and I liked the responsibility, even though it wasn't always easy. For one thing, we lost one brother to drugs when he was only nineteen. I found I had to grow up a little faster after that. That was the major tragedy in our family history, and it might have torn us apart. Yet, we remained very close when we were young and even though we drifted apart a

little as adults, most of us continue to remain close.

I was the first person in my family to come to Christ. Everyone thought I was nuts. We were raised as fairly strict Catholics and no one really saw the need for a personal relationship with Jesus. He had always been in the picture. So, what was new?

Unlike a lot of people who say they had problems with their parents, I never had any complaints about my mother. As far as I could tell, she was the perfect support to my dad and as wonderful a mother as I can ever imagine. She had the love and respect of us all and there was nothing we wouldn't do for her. She was patient, kind, loving, faithful and an excellent listener.

I could go on and on about Mom. She was always there when I needed her. Yet, when it came to a personal relationship with Jesus, she and I didn't always see eye-to-eye.

I can remember sharing Christ with my Mother for the very first time. It didn't go so well. In fact she resented it. Sharing Jesus with devout Catholics is not always easy. Sharing with your devout Catholic mother can be relational suicide. To my mom, the whole sharing experience communicated to her that all of her efforts as a parent had not been quite good enough.

No matter how I phrased things, what she heard me say was that she didn't raise me right. Of course, I really wasn't trying to say that at all. But when you look at child rearing in the spiritual sense, my words were true enough.

Certainly, she had taught me right from wrong and introduced me to the Christian religion. She and Dad had sacrificed financially to send all of us to Catholic school. We were in church every Sunday and holy day. But she didn't

introduce me to the Saviour. She couldn't because she didn't know him personally. She acted on the light that she had at the time.

When I shared Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and Saviour, my words drove an immediate wedge between us. Isn't that ironic? Jesus Christ came between us. I could understand it if I came trying to sell her on some Asian mystic. But this was Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The same Jesus she had encouraged me to love. Go figure that one.

Even though my mom would agree that He was indeed the Son of God, she had never really taken the next step and asked Him to take over her life. That was an entirely new concept to my mother.

After an initial confrontation on this touchy topic, Mom kept her distance from me. Then, when we began to talk seriously again, our conversations degenerated into arguments. In fact, these discussions marked the first time in my 27 years as her son that we had ever really argued about anything.

I was seeing a side of my mom that I had never seen. The gentle listener had suddenly become tough as nails. She dug in. A wall of tension arose between us as she began to view me as "suddenly self-righteous". For the first time in her life she didn't like me.

At first, my mother assumed that I was into some weird religious group. Her attitude was that the Catholic Church has been good enough for us all of these years, so why all of a sudden isn't it good enough now? The focus of her prayers was that I would come back to the Catholic Church.

Setting out to prove me wrong, Mom bought a Bible. She was going to show me she was right if that was the last thing

she did. She read and studied her Bible day after day. Like a good Catholic, she continued to pray the prayers of her youth. But above all, she read her Bible because she sensed that in those pages laid the truths that would trip me up.

For months the tension built. We would try to talk about spiritual things but there was never any breakthrough. I must say that in looking back I don't believe that I was as gentle as I should have been.

Too much zeal – that's a personal flaw that has plagued me plenty of times. With spiritual passion ablaze and lighting fires here and there and everywhere, I wanted to change the lives of others without consideration of and sensitivity to their needs. Such zeal out of control can become stupidity. And I am sure that my mom caught her share of my stupidity, even though I meant well.

Zeal without gentleness is non-productive. It not only makes people defensive; it also makes them sceptical about the kind of love that you say you've found.

If I lacked compassion, however, God did not. Never forget that God has a toolbox full of life circumstances that can break anyone. For my mom it was a combination of a bad back and a house fire.

My parents were building a new home about two kilometres from us, but during construction it burned to the ground. That stopped them both in their tracks. Shortly after that, Mom was making her bed and slipped a disk in her back. She was laid up for three weeks. My mother had been through major back surgery more than once and she sensed that she might be in for it again. God had her attention.

My mother had a lot of time to think during her

recuperation. It was then that God renewed her love for me and began to bring her to Himself.

What exactly did it take for Mom to come around? I have to say that at the time there were a lot of our friends praying for my mother. I believe that is where the work was done. I also called her one day just to tell her I loved her.

The answering machine was on, and with a lot of love in my heart and voice I simply said, "Mom, I don't want to fight. I love you and your battle is really not with me. Since you're reading your Bible a lot lately, would you look at one verse, Mom? It's John 5:39-40. I love you, Mom. I really do.

John 5:39-40 says this: "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is these that bear witness of Me; and you are unwilling to come to Me, that you may have life."

That was it. That passage was all it took. God spoke to her through that Word and she came to Christ that very week. We were restored immediately.

I'll also never forget when, only three months later, she gave her testimony at a Bible study that I was teaching. She said, "I've prayed for 10 years that my son would come back to the Catholic Church. But little did I know that it would be his prayers that would lead me to the living God."

As I write these words, my mom has now been walking with God since 1982. We're closer today than ever before.

Discussion Questions

Chapter 17 – Tough Cookie

1. Have you ever come on too strong with your mum or dad?
2. What did you see about the power of the word in this story?
3. Are you convinced that God can do whatever He wants to do in our families?
4. Is it harder to let Him work there? If so, why?
5. Biblically speaking do you think that God views our blood-related families the same as we do or different than we do?

chapter 18

granny's a sinner, too

Having any one of four possible grandparents is a real blessing in life. Having all four for over 20 years is more of a joy than I can express.

My dad's parents, Laura and Joe, were Italian. They were quite a pair. But they are a story for a different day.

My mother's parents were both French, and lived a much quieter life than Laura and Joe. They kept more to themselves and were into things like gardening and fishing. Laura and Joe were more into crowds. "How many can we feed on Sunday?" was their idea of a good time.

All four of my grandparents were deeply steeped in the Catholic faith. For them there was nothing else. It was the only one true religion. All four were at church every Sunday

and every "holy day of obligation". They ate no meat on Friday, received ashes on Ash Wednesday and attended Stations of the Cross at Easter.

All four of them did whatever the Church directed. It was also the way we of the younger generation were raised. Such family ties exerted a traditional pull that was hard to overcome.

Yet, external tradition doesn't automatically translate into internal spirituality. When I met Christ in 1980 it didn't take long until I started to wonder if my grandparents had a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

That's a tough call, isn't it? It was hard to tell exactly where they stood. With their peculiar cultural slant, which was different from the American culture that had moulded me, the Catholic Church was all they ever knew. My love for my grandparents was so strong that I didn't want to think the worst. Yet questions constantly haunted me concerning them.

Could they have been totally deceived – or is there some chance they have the minimum truth they need to be saved?

Do they really think that if you just go to church you're fine – or is there something more and life-changing in their personal spiritual experience?

Do they really believe that you can pray for people's souls after they die and that those prayers, coupled with lighted candles, will eventually get a person into heaven?

How much should you probe into your grandparents' lives? How much should you question their beliefs? How much should you confront?

There are very few things that have ever troubled me like these questions. I wanted to speak up. But I had started to get odd looks and comments when they found out that I was no

longer attending the Catholic Church.

Much of their reaction was nothing more than disappointment. I had been an altar boy when I was growing up and had even talked of becoming a priest. Now that obviously wasn't going to happen.

There were a couple of times that one of my grandmothers had asked me, with a slight tone of disgust, why I had ever left the Catholic Church. Their questions never opened up any meaningful dialogue however. These were questions that they really didn't want answered. But I was content with that. I made a commitment to pray that God would give me opportunities to share with them and that my sharing would have an impact. The commitment to pray helped me to see things in the proper perspective and maintain God's love for my grandparents.

The most difficult thing about that time was reconciling two worlds – one spiritual and the other church-oriented – that on the surface didn't quite fit. Yet despite our differences, I always regarded the visits I paid to both sets of grandparents as resembling something out of a storybook. It was as though they were always there, sitting on a stationary page of time, just waiting for you to come by. Your visit was their day. There was never a sense of hurry and always a sense of acceptance. Something wonderful was always on the stove. The only difference was the type of cuisine – French in one home and Italian in the other.

Both grandfathers died first. As much as I loved both of them, they didn't communicate with me as much, or on as deep a level, as my grandmothers.

Grandma Talamo was the next to go. She and I had had a

couple of good talks in her later years and she assured me that Jesus Christ was the one whom she was counting on to get her to heaven. I saw a real softening in her toward my stand for Christ and that made our conversations easy. We loved each other.

The only one left was Grandma Bergeron, my mother's mom. She was a tall, strong French woman. Usually she remained very quiet until she had an opinion about someone or something that she wanted to express. When she finally spoke up, her strong stand on things would almost seem out of character when you considered her usually quiet demeanour.

The more I studied her, the more concerned I became. She had raised eight children and, at the time of her death, had already buried three sons, a grandson and her husband. Two of her daughters were Catholic nuns who served in convents.

Catholic tradition permeated her home like a thick fog. There were pictures, statues and varied artefacts, some of them from Rome. But it didn't take long to see that there was a deep bitterness in my grandmother concerning some of the turns that her life had taken. Some of the harder times she had faced had evidently left her with a cold, hard edge. As she aged, these hard edges became more and more apparent.

I can remember times when I would walk in on her praying through her rosary, something she did every day without fail. Even though she would stop to talk to me, it was obvious that things were not well with her soul.

"What's wrong, Granny?" I would ask her.

"Oh, nothing," she would reply. It's just hell getting old."

It seemed as though times of prayer left her more discouraged than encouraged. And that bothered me. That was

not the God I was coming to know and love.

There were times when I would try to open the door to spiritual things in our conversations. But she let me know real fast that some things were not open for discussion.

"You have your religion and I have mine," she would tell me.

"But Granny, I don't want to talk about religion," I would plead with her.

"Never you mind," she would retort and that would be the end of it for a while.

I loved my grandmother. And as I considered how much I loved her, I knew that there was going to be a time when I would have to take some risks and ask some hard questions of her.

I don't thrive on that kind of confrontation, especially not when a family member is involved. But it seemed that as far as my family was concerned, I had been elected by God to take the truth to her.

The more I studied Granny, the more concerned I became about where she might be spiritually. I had seen enough people die around me to know that death was real and certain. The window of opportunity would not always remain open. My grandmother was nearing 75 and I wanted her to have an assurance about her relationship with God.

A constant heaviness surrounded me as I would think and pray for her. So I asked the Lord to give me a clear opportunity as soon as possible.

The day finally came. I was in town on business and had planned to see my parents, but I was suddenly prompted to stop at Granny's. This visit started very much like all the others. There she was in her rocker, sort of staring off into space.

As I studied the situation, however, I realised that things were a little different. She seemed more removed from me. There wasn't anything on the stove and she barely managed a smile. It was as if she knew I was there on business. As I went over to kiss her, she tightened. Her reception to me was only lukewarm at best.

"Hi Granny, how are you today?"

"Okay for old folks," she said. "How are you?"

"Good, Granny. I'm really glad to see you."

"I'm glad to see you, too. What in the world are you up to today?"

"Well, I was thinking about you and I wanted us to talk a little bit. Would that be okay?"

"Go ahead," she replied. "I don't have anywhere to go."

"Well, Granny, I feel like our relationship has been a bit strained lately because of my stand for Jesus Christ and that really concerns me. You don't think Jesus is something that should divide us, do you?"

She immediately got defensive. "Kelly, I told you before, I don't want to talk about your religion. You do what you want to do and leave me to mine."

I could see right away that she had stiffened up quite a bit. There was hardness in her voice and coldness in her eyes that I had never seen before. I moved closer to her and looked into her eyes.

As gently as I could, I continued: "Granny, I don't want to talk about religion and I don't want you to change yours. I want to talk about what you think about Jesus. I want to know if you can tell me what you are trusting in for your eternal security. Can you do that?"

She simply stared off coldly.

"Granny, can you tell me that you are trusting in the work of Jesus on the Cross as the basis for your entry to heaven?"

She continued to stare silently, with her fists clenched. Now I was really concerned. I didn't want to offend her, yet I felt that at that moment I needed to pursue the discussion further.

Slowly, I went over to her and knelt at her feet. I gently put my head in her lap just to be close to her. I remained there just holding her for a few moments while I asked the Lord to soften her heart. I began to cry. It was a touching moment for me and I think for her has well. A moment in which I know without a doubt that she sensed my love and concern for her as never before.

Gathering myself, I began again slowly. "Granny, what Jesus did on the Cross was for you and me. He suffered and died for both of us. It wasn't just for murderers and thieves. It was for people like us. We need what Jesus did as much as anyone. We are all sinners."

What I heard next rocked me to my core.

"I'm not a sinner," she said most definitely.

I was stopped in my tracks. I collected my thoughts and lifted my head to look her in the eyes.

"Grandmother," I said solemnly, "I'm sorry, but you must surely know that you are a sinner."

"No, I'm not," she insisted.

"But Granny, we're all sinners. That's why Jesus did what He did. In fact, we are just as bad as any other sinners."

There was a long pause as she looked away from me. I began to weep. Through my tears I looked at her and wondered what had gone wrong. How could she react like this? How could

a woman in her seventies who prayed the rosary every day sit there and respond to her grandson like this?

Asking God for help, I thought I would try one more thing before I left.

"Granny," I said, "please look at me. Do you believe that I love you?"

She didn't respond.

"I love you, Granny. You know I do. You are precious to me. Now let me ask you a question. Do you love me?"

There was no response.

"I know you do, Granny. Now look at me and tell me that you love me. You've said it a thousand times but I am asking you to tell me now."

There was no movement, no show of emotion, and no response. She simply stared daggers through the wall. I was crushed.

"Look at this, Granny. Do you see what's going on here? You can't even tell me that you love me. You can't tell me you love me because right now you hate me because of what I am telling you. Don't you see that? That is sin, Granny."

She would not be moved. Nothing I said seemed to have any effect. I could only bury my head in her lap and cry.

After about a minute, I lifted my head to speak to her. "Granny, I am going to leave you now but I want you to know something. Jesus Christ is there for you, waiting for a relationship with you. He understands what you feel and even how you feel about me right now. I would ask you to go to Him, confess your sins to Him, and He will give you the peace that you so desperately want and need. Would you do that, Grandmother?"

It was no use. I saw that she wasn't going to speak to me. Finally, rising to my feet, I clenched her hand once more, leaned over, and kissed her goodbye. She sat there motionless in the chair as I left the room and her home.

Moving toward my car, I found myself flooded with a strange mixture of feelings, both pain and peace. Our conversation hadn't gone well as far as I could tell. That was painful. But there was peace. It was a peace that only follows when you know that you responded correctly to the opportunity that God has given you at the moment. Uncomfortable as it had been, I believed I had done the right thing at the right time.

I can't tell you for sure how or where my grandmother ended up. I wish I knew. I do know this, however, after that day there was no more tension between us. I can't explain it and I certainly don't understand it. But, from then on things were different between us.

I think that one reason for the change was that from that point on my Granny respected me. It has also been my prayer that perhaps from that point on she came to trust God as much as she did the Church.

Discussion Questions

Chapter 18 – Granny's A Sinner, Too

1. Were you raised with a spiritual background?
2. Have you ever had a spiritual confrontation with a family member that ended anything like this?
3. How much should we probe into the lives of our grandparents, uncles or aunts that are committed to their religion? Is that our place?
4. What's the toughest part about sharing with someone who it appears is trusting their family's traditional religion for salvation?
5. The beautiful part about this confrontation (or any confrontation) is that we don't really know the spiritual outcome. Why do you think God allows that to happen?
6. Why do you think we feel the need to see things happen? Is that a lack of faith?

chapter 19

living with little brother

My brother, Kirt, and I are as different as day and night. For starters, we're 15 years apart. I am the oldest. He is the youngest. I'm an extrovert. He's an extreme introvert. I'm impulsive. He's calculating. I see the big picture. He sees every detail. I like answers while he thrives on questions. I may be bowled over by the beauty of a huge pine forest as he stands in awe of the intricate pine beetle. We chuckle at how different we are. But our deep love for each other has never been in question.

One summer, Kirt worked for me as a lawn maintenance technician. He cut grass! He had considered quitting college and coming on full-time, but that summer changed his mind for good. The prospective trials of college pale when viewed

from the end of a lawn mower. After his summer with me Kirt decided to return to Louisiana to continue his studies in respiratory therapy.

During the three months Kirt lived with us, he never mentioned Jesus. He would quietly claim that he was a Christian but he never asked any questions about God or how to live the Christian life. I never once saw him pick up a Bible nor did I sense any hunger for spiritual truth. I was concerned.

Atlanta soon became a lonely place for Kirt and we never saw him seek out people. Our family was all he had. But we knew in the long run that we were not enough.

Being a very quiet person, Kirt was also very private concerning his relationships. When he dated, he rarely discussed his dates. He had always been that way. If you wanted to know anything about Kirt you needed to ask all the questions.

But after he returned to Louisiana, one particular name – Heather – began to surface in conversations. While it seemed that he and Heather had something serious going on between them, Kirt communicated only minimal information in sound bites. So it was impossible to know what that "something" was. Even my parents, with whom he was living at the time, didn't know what to make of Kirt and Heather.

Compared to anyone else who visited our family, Heather was very different. My mom's words seemed to say it all.

"What's she like, Mom?" I enquired.

"Oh, you'll see," was all she would say.

Those three words communicated only a fraction of her meaning. Her tone said much more. Mom loves people, but I suspected strongly that she didn't like Heather.

Our family was going to New Orleans for the Thanksgiving holidays. All of the kids would be there and Kirt announced that Heather would join us. All three of my children loved their Uncle Kirt. His living with us had built a bond with them and they couldn't wait to meet Heather. Their expectations were sky-high.

Since the day mom had launched her not-so-subtle message about Heather, Mary and I were concerned about meeting her. Before we left, we prayed as a family that God would bless our time together and that we would have great opportunities to share our faith while we were there.

At first glance, Heather fit right in. Nice smile. Polite manner. So far, so good. Her slim and trim stature seemed to make her an ideal companion for Kirt.

It was obvious that Kirt was taken with her. It was also obvious that Kirt was in too deep. To me, you're in "too deep" when a new relationship has negative effects on already existing, positive relationships – especially relationships that involve other Christians.

Since Heather had come into the picture, I had sensed that Kirt had been distancing himself from my family, my mom, and me. That just wasn't right. A healthy relationship with a young woman would have strengthened those bonds. In other words, as a natural consequence of where he was spiritually, Kirt was pulling back from our family. He was there in body, but not in mind or heart.

As the day wore on, my sense of Kirt's separation from us grew stronger and I looked and prayed for an opportunity to talk with him. But the opportunity never seemed to come.

Thanksgiving dinner ended. And as good American

citizens, we slowly drifted into dessert and football. Kirt and I talked about a lot of different things during the meal and the game, but I could never find a way into his soul. He kept that well-guarded. In terms of an open door to talk about God, nothing seemed to develop.

Finally, in the late afternoon, Kirt asked if I would ride with him to the bank. "Yes," I said to myself, "this is it."

But this wasn't "it". Not even close.

Yet the irony is that Kirt and I had a great time. We talked freely about school, employment opportunities, and a little about Heather. He had begun to loosen up and we were enjoying just being with each other. It was a relatively good outing. It just didn't go the way I thought it would.

I had prayed for an opportunity to talk about spiritual things and I was confident that an opening would come. But it didn't. I looked hard and waited for the right moment. Yet the moment simply didn't arrive.

It's sort of funny how that goes. Sometimes you feel that if things are going well you will automatically have an opportunity and a responsibility to share your faith. And then, in this scenario, you lead your loved one to a relationship with Christ.

But that's human logic, not divine wisdom. A good time together today – a time of sharing and spirit-softening – may simply prepare the way for a future spiritual opportunity. In fact, your present opportunity may actually prepare the way for someone else to act and bring your friend or family member home to God. You water the soil and another person reaps the spiritual harvest – a humbling but necessary division of functions in the work of the kingdom.

Sharing Christ with relatives holds the same tensions as sharing with strangers or friends. It's a spiritual work. And because it's a spiritual work it needs to be Spirit-driven, not schedule-driven.

The Apostle Paul prayed for "a door of utterance to be opened" (Colossians 4:3). And on that beautiful Thanksgiving Day with Kirt, the door for me was clearly shut. Big smile, great time, but closed door.

I sensed myself beginning to get a little frustrated. At several points in the conversation I wanted to forge ahead for God. But I had to constantly remind myself of my guiding principles. I needed to be Spirit-led and opportunity-sensitive. As I checked my heart I felt I was operating in the Spirit. I had great peace and our conversation was effortless. But, as well as I could tell, there was no opportunity to speak about spiritual things – and I couldn't understand why.

Over the years, I've learned that if I am operating in the Spirit but I lack the opportunity to say what I had planned to say, I must not force it! The damage from moving too fast can be devastating. Boldness is not always the best response.

I had forced God's spiritual pace in the past and, on this day, I wanted to force the issue with Kirt. But by the grace of God I held my tongue.

I had my Gospel-pitch rehearsed. The words in my mind were clear. I was all set. Kirt had to know the truth. I was so close to just speaking up. I felt that I had to set Kirt straight. God, however, had a much better plan.

It's not easy to trust God with silence. I'm not wired that way. I want to see things happen quickly. But I knew deep in my heart that the door was not open. I also knew that if I did

speak up, I would be the one speaking, not God.

Finally, I resigned myself to the spiritual facts at hand and rested in God's direction. I relaxed and enjoyed my brother's company and God's gentle leading on a beautiful Thanksgiving Day.

When we returned home to Atlanta, I sat in my study and wondered why things had gone as they had in New Orleans. Was it a wasted trip? Did we drive 800 kilometres just to eat turkey?

Not at all. If we truly live by faith and trust God with our lives and activities, then nothing we do is ever in vain. Every movement we make relates to the spiritual dimension. Our role here on earth is to display Him and we are to remember that the results are His, not ours (easier to write than to practice).

But even though my face-to-face communication with Kirt had apparently been stymied, I was prompted to write a letter. This way of reaching out seemed just right because I could reflect on my words more before I expressed them to Kirt.

As I began to write, I sensed great freedom. I felt I could write the truth in love and, in confidence, leave the results with God.

I shared with Kirt my belief that he loved Heather like no other woman I had seen him with. If he did indeed love her, I said, the best he could do for her was to love her with the kind of love that lasts. That's God's love. So, I asked him to consider with me what his love might mean from God's perspective.

I reminded him that he said that he was a believer. I didn't say that – he did. If that was indeed true, I asked him to look at his responsibility as a believer in the relationship.

I asked Kirt if he was sure about who owned him. If it was

Jesus, then did he feel his relationship with Heather honoured his Master? I continued with other simple questions and closed by telling him that I loved him very much and wanted nothing but the best for him.

After waiting a week, I decided that I would call my mom and see if Kirt had received my letter. I thought that, perhaps, he might have mentioned the letter to her.

I was startled when Kirt answered the phone, but we jumped right into conversation and agreed about how great it had been to see each other. I asked him how his work was going and we discussed the upcoming game between New Orleans and Atlanta.

I decided at the outset of our talk that I wouldn't bring up anything spiritual unless he did. Again, for me this was a supreme exercise in patience. But God gave me the grace to move at His pace.

Just as we were about to hang up Kirt broke the ice. "Kelly," he began in a tone that I knew was about to change the direction of our conversation.

"Yes," I answered.

"The letter," he said…and stopped.

I could tell in his voice that we were about to set sail on interesting spiritual waters. I waited for him to continue.

"It's true. Everything you said. It's all true."

His tone was humble and I sensed I was talking to an entirely different man from the one I had chatted with at Thanksgiving.

He continued: "Kelly, these last few weeks with Heather have been horrible and now I can see why. I've never professed Christ to her. I've never mentioned anything to her about God.

She didn't know where I was or what I really believed. The whole thing has been wrong and now I see why. It's light and darkness. As soon as I got your letter, I knew I was in trouble."

For a moment, all I could do was sit there in silence. I was deeply grateful to God and I quietly let Him know it. Finally, I responded.

"Kirt, did you want to talk about this during Thanksgiving?"

"No way," he replied firmly. "It's funny, because when Mom told me that you and the family were coming I got ready for you. I knew you weren't going to like what you saw. I was just waiting for you to bring something up so I could tell you to mind your own business."

"In fact, when we went to the bank I was sure you were going to start in on me. I was ready. The fact that you didn't say anything was killing me! I was more convicted by your silence than anything you could have said."

I smiled and shook my head. You're amazing, Lord!

"So Kirt, where do you go from here?" I asked. "If you're in trouble then what are you going to do about it?"

"Oh, I've already done it," he stated.

"Done what?" I asked.

"Everything I needed to do. Let me back up. When I got your letter on Thursday I talked with Heather that very night. I told her everything. I told her that I was a Christian but that I wasn't living like one and I needed to get right with God. I let her know that I would be attending church this weekend and she was welcome to come if she wanted to.

"It's funny. When she said she would go with me I began wrestling with where to go. I wanted her to have a good experience but I was fearful of what she would think. I knew

right away that if I took her to any kind of a boring service she wouldn't be interested.

"I wanted to take her to Victory Temple but I was afraid of what she would do when they started dancing in the aisles. You know they get pretty wound-up over there. Finally I said, 'What the heck. If boring loses her and dancing loses her then I might as well go down with a party.' So off to Victory Temple we went.

"Kelly, the service was great. The speaker talked about a personal commitment and what it took to make a real stand for Jesus Christ. I was already so convicted that it didn't take much to finish me off. I rededicated my life to Christ that night and I'm not looking back. I decided that, even if I lost Heather, I wasn't turning back."

That was five years ago and Kirt hasn't looked back since. He saw he was off the track and he confessed his waywardness to God. He counted the cost and made the decision he had to make. And that decision involved a high price.

Today, Kirt is happily married to a wonderful Christian woman. He is involved in a men's Bible study, an accountability group, and is a regular attendant at men's retreats. He also shares his faith on a regular basis. He is indeed "growing in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ." He is a transformed creature. It is an incredible sight.

What about Heather?

To learn her fate, read on.

Discussion Questions

Chapter 19 – Living with Little Brother

1. What are the relationships like with your brothers and sisters? Have you been able to share Christ with any of them?
2. How did the S.O.S. principle help Kelly at the bank?
3. What part did silence play in this story? Is that easy or difficult for you?
4. Kirt was willing to lay everything on the line with Heather, including their relationship. Is there anything you wouldn't risk for the gospel?
5. Pause as a group to pray for family members. As you do, consider asking God three things:
    a. Do I need to be a little more vocal with my brothers and sisters?
    b. Do I need to be a little less vocal?
    c. Do I need to be silent?

chapter 20

save the whales

Heather was an avid environmentalist. Not just an ordinary environmentalist, but a combination of feminist-plus-environmentalist with a twist of New Age thrown in for extra flavour.

A committed vegetarian (out of spiritual conviction, not just for health), she believed in reincarnation and astrology and spent most of her time with like-minded intellectuals who helped to reinforce her special mind-set.

Life to Heather was having a good time, philosophising with friends about the perfect environment, and supporting Greenpeace. If guidance was needed, you could always consult the tarot cards or check in with a local psychic.

Heather's view of Christians was already fixed firmly in her

mind. They were "weak and fragile people who were boring to talk to, narrow-minded in their thinking, and had little to offer society."

Like many who adhere to a New Age mind-set, she had to admit that she didn't personally know any real Christians. But her opinions where so strong that, as far as she was concerned, they were solid fact.

As far apart as Heather and I were in our thinking, I could understand and relate to her love for the creation. It is that same love of nature that had pulled me into landscaping and motivated me to want to study and work with plants in the great outdoors.

There is absolutely nothing wrong with loving and desiring to protect creation. After all, this is our earthly home. A problem arises, however, when you elevate that love for creation above your love for the Creator. You then begin to serve the creation instead of the Creator, and that doesn't make God happy. Not at all. The Book of Romans (chapter 1) is quite clear on this issue. Worshipping creation is high on God's top-10 list of activities that human beings should avoid.

There was an additional problem that was unique to Heather. She was in love with my brother, Kirt, and they seemed to be moving toward marriage. I was not a happy camper when it registered with me that I was about to have a New Age sister-in-law.

You'll recall the Thanksgiving dinner story. This was our first encounter with Heather, and there was no doubt that Kirt and Heather did make a very cute couple. They seemed to have it all. But unfortunately, Heather was influencing Kirt to distance himself from the family he was so close to.

To me that was a dangerous threat. The members of the Talamo family enjoyed one another's company. But instead of solidifying the bond, Heather's presence disturbed us. We had never experienced anything quite like that before. The sense of apprehension in the room grew stronger as it became more apparent that this thing between Heather and Kirt was pretty serious.

The tension really spiked just after Dad announced it was time to gather for dinner. As we began to move toward the traditional feast he asked everyone to circle around for prayer. As usual, Dad asked me to lead.

As I prayed, I can remember stretching my prayer out a little to ask God to make Himself real to all present. That wasn't an unusual move for me because one of my sisters and her husband didn't know the Lord at that time. My dad wasn't a believer either – even though he felt comfortable asking me to pray at meals.

But even though my prayer wasn't just for Heather, I had given her a special place that day on my list of concerns. I wanted her to hear if God happened to speak to her through me. On the other hand, I did exercise some restraint. I managed to pull the plug on my zeal before I gave an actual altar call.

By my restraint didn't count for much. The family's interaction with Heather tracked the temperature for the turkey – it became colder as the day progressed. By the early afternoon you could feel the strain in the air.

As things deteriorated I resolved to just stay back, remain quiet, and let the Lord have His way. To be honest, I felt awkward for Heather because I knew she was feeling

uncomfortable. I watched from a distance as Mom, Mary and my two sisters, Kim and Karla, tried hard to pull Heather into their orbit. But the emotional and spiritual walls were tough and thick, and progress in breaking through was very slow.

As roadblock after roadblock appeared in these attempts to relate to Heather, I turned my attention to Kirt. As you know, he and I went off to the bank, even as God was operating in His own way back at the house. Funny how we forget how unlimited God really is. We don't have to be present for Him to work His wonders. Yet, why does that surprise us?

Heather and my two daughters, Summer and Brooke, were preparing for an outing to the mall. Two younger cousins, Amanda and Jamie, joined in and the mood became much lighter and giggly. Finally, Heather seemed to relax.

But her break from the pervasive Talamo spirituality didn't last long. As I heard later, Brooke, a 12-year-old at the time, and Amanda started talking about Sunday school. Noticing that Heather was listening closely, Brooke turned to her and asked, "What do you think about God?"

Heather's response was rather defensive. "That is a very personal thing and each person has their own way, Brooke. God is in everything and so there are a lot of ways to find out about spiritual matters."

For a 12-year-old, Brooke was spiritually rather precocious. After considering Heather's comment for a moment, she responded with wide-eyed childlike directness: "No, Heather, I don't think that's the way it is. I believe that God is personal and the only way to Him is through a relationship with Jesus Christ."

Heather didn't hesitate. "Brooke, that's fine if that is what

you believe, but you shouldn't push that on anyone."

That was the end of that conversation.

The rest of our time in New Orleans continued on as normal. We visited, laughed, and enjoyed one another again. As far as spiritual interaction, there wasn't much. In fact, I didn't see Heather after Thursday and our family left on Saturday afternoon for the nine-hour drive back to Atlanta.

As afternoon drifted into evening, the activities of the weekend took their toll. One by one, the children fell asleep in our station wagon. In the quiet of those moments, I reflected on the events of the weekend.

I can remember wondering why nothing seemed to open up with Kirt. I felt as though I was losing him and I wondered if I had said enough. I was questioning myself and second-guessing my decision to remain quiet and just enjoy him.

To compound my distress, nothing spiritual had happened with Heather. In fact, it seemed to me that we had gone backwards. With this additional burden nagging away at me, I found myself feeling increasingly frustrated as I drove through the night.

Mary, sensing my thoughts, looked over and asked, "What did you think about the weekend, Kelly?"

I shared my general frustration.

"So what do you think about Heather?" she asked.

"Heather?" I paused, searching for words that would capture my feelings. "I think that Heather is a 10-year-prayer project."

Mary quietly nodded. "She's hard, isn't she?"

"Hard," I replied. "She's more than hard. There's blindness there. There's a coldness that scares me and it's rubbing off on Kirt. I couldn't get one word in with her. I didn't sense an

opportunity to say a thing. Mary, I'm afraid that this is going to be a long haul. I'm serious – she's really a 10-year- project."

As we sat there quietly for a moment, the sense of gloom seemed to intensify – until suddenly, the silence was broken by a small voice from the middle seat just behind us. It was Brooke.

"I shared with her," she said.

Mary and I looked at each other. We thought she had been asleep along with the other two. But apparently she was just lying down and had been listening.

"I had a moment to talk to her," she volunteered as she sat up and leaned in closer to us.

"Tell us, Brooke," Mary encouraged.

"Well, it wasn't much, and it didn't go very well," she continued with a tone of disappointment. "She rejected me."

Brooke softly spoke of her exchange with Heather as they were preparing to leave for the mall. As I listened intently to her story, my heart began to well up. At that moment my thoughts were not on Heather, but on Brooke. I was not just listening to a young girl's recall of a simple conversation. I was hearing my daughter describe her first spiritual wrestling match with "principalities and powers." I was seeing a 12-year-old grow up spiritually before my very eyes.

Out of a love for her Uncle Kirt and a strong conviction about the truth, Brooke had taken a risk. Silently moved, I thanked God for His hand on this child's life. You could have sent me to heaven right then and there. My frustration disappeared and I was a contented man.

Mary and I affirmed Brooke. We told her that Heather's rejection was not a rejection of her personally, but of Christ.

Brooke had simply represented Him, and that is what Heather saw. Brooke had just experienced a small taste of what it means to identify with Jesus. We assured her that the small word of truth she had proclaimed and the love that she had demonstrated with Heather was not in vain. God could and would use it.

She understood. She had been expecting something more and Heather's response had been both disappointing and painful to her. But when she viewed the situation from a spiritual perspective, her attitude changed and she was able to give thanks to God for the moment He had given her with Heather. The three of us prayed right then for Heather and asked God to take the words of a child and the truth about His Son and make it real to her.

When we arrived home late that night, the family gathered to talk for a moment. Everyone was tired and it would have been easy to just go to bed. But we took a moment to review our trip.

We remembered that we had prayed for a spiritual opportunity before we left. We agreed that God's "ambushes" that day hadn't been laid as we had expected. They were better.

We told the kids of Brooke's encounter with Heather, and as a family we joined hands and prayed for her salvation and the restoration of Uncle Kirt. It was truly a family team effort and a wonderful moment in our lives. We went to bed very full of God's Spirit that night.

The next ten days didn't go as expected either. First of all, as you already know, God used my letter to Kirt in a big way. He went to Heather and confessed that he knew Christ but was not living like a Christian and he could no longer continue this

way. No matter what happened to them, he told her that his first step was to get his relationship right with the Lord. He said that Sunday he was going to be attending church and that she was welcome to come if she desired.

Heather asked Kirt to pray with her the Saturday night before church. She felt as though God was already drawing her. She then asked Kirt if he would attend the Unitarian church. Kirt already had a place to go. But, if she would go with him he would visit the Unitarian the following week.

Heather could see it in Kirt's eyes. He was serious. There was conviction as well as determination. Kirt was moving on and Heather was about to be left behind. You'll recall that the church Kirt chose to attend was a bit on the enthusiastic side. The people didn't hesitate to praise God. Kirt had wondered what Heather would think, but that question did not deter him. God had entered his heart and He was about to explode inside.

Sunday arrived and Heather did accompany Kirt to church as she had promised. The service was lively and Heather silently questioned what was going on. She wondered, "Why am I suddenly in the midst of a group of people I wouldn't have even spoken to a couple of weeks ago?"

Heather had become a woman in turmoil. Despite all of her high, lofty and sometimes dogmatic political and social views, she now realised that she was empty inside.

"These churches were considered very ignorant among my circle of friends and family," she said later. "Nonetheless, I went. I figured there was nothing to lose except the hopelessness that was deep down in my heart."

The Word of God was preached with power and conviction that day. Toward the end of the service, Kirt turned to Heather

and said, "I am going to the front. I have to. I need to meet Jesus Christ."

She grabbed him and said, "No!"

But he went anyway.

She then felt God pushing her to the front as well, and so she forced herself forward. She felt that when the preacher was speaking, the words were intended just for her.

The evidence of a changed life is so powerful. That very evening, Heather sat on a sofa with my mother and confessed belief in Christ. A new relationship was formed. Later that evening, without a word of prompting from anyone, Heather found herself clearing her apartment of many items that only one week before had been quite important to her. New Age books, magazines, tarot cards and the like went straight into the trash bag.

Kirt and Heather continued to date for three more months. He was an intern at the Oscher Medical Centre, and Heather would meet him regularly for lunch so that they could eat and study the Bible together. As they grew closer spiritually they also discovered real love for the first time.

They were married the following February and are growing in grace to this very day.

Discussion Questions

Chapter 20 – Save the Whales

1. Did Heather remind you of anyone in your family?
2. Have you ever misjudged someone's receptivity to the gospel as bad as Kelly did?
3. Do you think the people we misjudge are able to pick up what we really think?
4. Why do you think that God chose to use Brooke the way he did?
5. Have you seen anyone come to Christ in a way that you never expected? Why do sudden moves of God like this surprise us?
6. At times we don't only limit God, but we insist on limiting Him. Why?

chapter 21

strangers at my party

What's the most unforgettable summer of your life? I've had three from which to choose. All different, all exciting, and all unforgettable. But the summer of `95 was like no other.

I had agreed to spend that summer working in Covington, Louisiana assisting a client and friend in a three-month consulting project.

Earlier in our life together, Mary and I had made this small but growing little town our home for seven years. During that time, we had bought our first house, seen our three children born, started a landscape career, made money, lived a dream, went almost broke, learned what it really means to be humbled, and met Jesus.

So returning to Covington meant returning to my Christian

roots and reconnecting with some of our closest friends and deepest memories. Covington is also a short distance from my hometown of Marrero, Louisiana, where my immediate family still lives.

Usually, I'm not crazy about spending extended time away from home and family. In fact, travel gets less appealing on each trip. But I knew that somehow God was in this project. I sensed an ambush in the making, and when you get that inner nudging it's best not to debate if you want to keep your peace.

There were some important personal reasons to expect unusual spiritual action on this trip. For one thing, my father's health had been failing. I saw this as perhaps my last opportunity for some extended time with him. Dad lived only about 60 kilometres from the project. Congestive heart failure could claim him in 10 years or 10 months. We had no idea.

If day one was any indication of what the summer would produce, we were in for a wild ride. At 4:00 pm, a good friend and spiritual brother named Bob, who I had planned to see the following week, went out to play some tennis. The weather was your typical Louisiana steam bath, at 35 degrees Celsius with 100-percent humidity.

During the second set of the match, Bob mentioned to his doubles partner that he didn't feel too well. He then turned his head, dropped to his knees and died instantly of a heart attack right there on the court. One moment he was serving in tennis and the next he was serving in heaven.

That was a sobering beginning to the summer of `95. Bob's death caused me to focus almost exclusively on essential and eternal matters. Suddenly, all my friends were quickly brought together at a funeral where God reminded all of us once again

that life is indeed "a vapour" and that we are called to make the most of this fleeting time.

At the funeral, one friend asked if I would like to work out with him during my summer stay. I jumped at the chance, both to relieve the emotional tension and also to re-establish an important personal contact.

So, like clockwork on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, Edgar and I would hit the gym. Not only had I found a personal trainer, but also a great encourager. As our muscles grew, so did our relationship. And, as often happens with spiritual brotherhood, one important relationship led to another.

While working out at the gym, Edgar introduced me to a good friend of his named David. David and his wife Ann were new to the faith and Edgar wanted them to meet more Christians. During the ensuing weeks, the three of us had great times, and David and I blossomed quickly as new friends.

Soon I was spending a lot of time at his home for dinner and, before I knew it, he and Ann had adopted me as one of their "summer orphans."

As with many new Christians, David and Ann had lots of questions – on parenting, marriage and church matters. As our conversations expanded, so did our love for one another. The time together flew quickly and it seemed that before I had blinked twice, the summer was nearly over.

With just a handful of days left for my stay, David cornered me at the gym and issued a flattering invitation. "Kelly," he said, "Ann and I were talking. Our summer together has been great. We've enjoyed you so much and we decided that we'd like to give you a going-away party. You invite your friends, tell me how many, and we'll take care of all the details. How about it?"

Now you have to understand, I'm not the kind of guy who always has people throwing parties for him. In fact, I've never had anyone except Mary want to give me a party. So my first reactionwasdiscomfortandembarrassmentratherthangratitude.

"David, you don't have to do that," I said. "That's too much trouble. I really appreciate it, but I don't need a party."

David didn't hesitate. "I didn't say you needed it. We just want to do it. Please let us do that for you."

I stood there emotionally handcuffed. Here, right in front of me, was a gift, and a very nice gift at that. I found myself in tension. There is often a moment like this where you have a choice about how you're going to respond to another's generosity. You can reach out, take the gift, honour the giver, and enjoy the benefits. Or you can decide you have no need for the gift, say "No, thanks" (probably insulting the giver) and move on. (As I was mulling over David's offer, I recalled that many people I had known took the second approach with the gift offered by Jesus Christ).

David simply watched as I processed my two options. I recognised that the only thing keeping me from a simple "yes" was pride. Something in me didn't like becoming indebted to others, regardless of how pure their motives were. Yet, I knew that response wasn't quite right.

In any event, I finally swallowed and made the right choice: "Yes, David. I would love it."

"Great," he snapped, grabbing the next set of weights. "We'll plan it as we work out. Just start inviting your friends and then tell us how many are coming. Ann and I will do the rest. It'll be great. Now, let's get back to work, I'm losing my pump."

As we continued our workout, I didn't see David in quite

the same light any more. I was touched. I was humbled. He certainly didn't owe me anything. Yet, both he and Ann wanted to give of themselves and all they wanted from me was to receive.

As we walked to our cars, I thanked him again and confessed that I was getting excited. Then I asked him a question. "David, would you consider doing something special for me at this party?"

"Sure, what's that?" he replied.

"Would you feel comfortable if we had a moment where everyone gathered and I had an opportunity to say a few words? I would like to take time to thank everyone who has been so gracious to me this summer and close our time together with a thought from the Bible."

This time it was David who was surprised. "Wow. You mean like a message? We've never done that at the house before. That would be great. Yeah, you plan on doing it and I'll tell Ann."

I noticed the idea was not only new but also exciting to David. He had been in homes where he heard the Word. Now, all of a sudden, the Word was going to go out from his.

The evening arrived and it was abundantly clear that David and Ann had outdone themselves. Delicious food, fine coffee, rich desserts and a great atmosphere all served to display their gift of hospitality.

Knowing them the way I did, I sort of expected that. I did not, however, expect the surprise components that David brought to the party. No, it wasn't exotic food, music, or decorations. The surprise components were strangers.

I had assumed that this party would be a great reunion for old friends where I'd be completely comfortable and could

really let my guard down. There would be no need for small talk or attempting to get to first-base with individuals I was encountering for the first time in my life.

I'd never even met some of these people I saw across the room. There they were, several strangers who looked totally relaxed and who appeared to be enjoying every minute of my party.

Somewhat perplexed, I found a number of questions swirling in my mind.

Why would my hosts invite strangers to my party? What was the point? Did David and Ann have some ulterior motive? For that matter, why would anyone come to a going-away party for someone they had never met?

When I finally met them – and it was inevitable that I would have to be introduced – what would I say? "Hi, I'm Kelly Talamo. Thank you for coming. By the way, who are you?"

Even though I was feeling out of sorts at my own party, they were totally comfortable. To them, I didn't seem to exist. I was evidently just an excuse they needed to get together and enjoy themselves. I was beginning to think that I could have walked out and the party wouldn't have missed a beat.

Then, I began to suspect a more ominous side to their presence. I began to think that my friend David, Mr Hospitality himself, was a chronic party animal. All he needed was a reason to justify his revelry, and on this occasion I happened to be a convenient target.

Grabbing a moment in the corner with him, I laid it on the line: "Say, David, could I ask you a question?"

"Go for it," he replied.

"Who are these people?"

"What people?" He asked as if he didn't know.

"The people I don't know," I replied.

"Oh, those people. Those are my friends," he beamed.

"Well, I gathered that. But tell me, why would your friends come to a going-away party for someone they've never met? That seems a little strange to me."

Not at all offended, David jumped right on that one. "Oh, not really. You see, Kelly, since you've been in town I've spent most of my free time with you. So I haven't seen much of my friends this summer. But they were happy for me and when they found out you were leaving they came to celebrate. Aren't they great?"

What could I say? So much for my apprehension. Every friend that David invited was as warm as he was. In fact, as it turned out, most of them knew my friends. So, the party was a major hit.

At about 9:30 pm David requested that we all gather in the living room. He did a great job of formally welcoming everyone as he took a couple of minutes to describe how our relationship had progressed during the summer.

First, he recounted warmly how much this summer had meant to him. Then he introduced me by saying that I was going to say a special thank-you and bring a thought from the Word of God, which had come to mean so much to him and Ann during the summer.

As the room grew quiet, I was touched with a deep sense of appreciation. I found myself surrounded with people who cared about David, Ann and me very much. It was one of those rare moments when you know that everything around you has been given to you even though you've done nothing to deserve the gift.

The words I spoke that night were simple. For 20 minutes I reflected on the brevity of life and how the summer had illustrated that to all of us. I commented that even when we are healthy we often take on too many responsibilities and too much work. Frequently, we find we have too little energy to pull it all off.

As work and responsibilities increase with age, energy diminishes. Sooner or later, we enter a sub-par zone where we know that we are operating in an energy void. When that happens we have only three options to regain our equilibrium:

- Increase personal energy (that's hard to do)
- Jettison responsibilities to lighten the load (that is what many people do)
- Trust God for what you cannot do in your own strength (and that is the biblical response God desires)

I finished quickly. The room was quiet as we closed in prayer.

Sitting just off to my left were two of those total strangers, Jay and his wife Michelle. A pleasant couple in their mid-thirties with a thriving business and two small boys at home. They had been invited by David for two reasons. First, he loved them and sensed they would feel loved at my party. Second, both he and Ann knew that I would share what they needed that night. He was right on both counts.

You really don't know what people are thinking when you are preparing to speak from the Bible. The person's face may say one thing while the heart says something entirely different.

In Jay's case, I didn't have a clue. I watch people closely as I speak and sometimes I can get a read on them – but sometimes I can't. When I looked at Jay that evening, the only words

that came to my mind were "locked in." I don't think the man blinked once as I spoke.

I wouldn't call it staring. His gaze was warmer than that. But I would call it focused. The guy didn't move. Sitting between Ann and his wife, he seemed off in some sort of zone. Yet, he was following every word I uttered.

I didn't have time to wonder much about his reaction because in a flash my talk was over. Jay and Michelle were the last to leave. In fact, an hour after I said "Amen," Jay was still seated in the same chair, next to the same people, asking question after question.

I went over and listened carefully as he spoke. He talked about his kids and his business, and he was very open about how he had been touched that evening. He mentioned how that night had given him a lot to think about. We exchanged phone numbers and he agreed to keep in touch.

David called Jay the next morning to see how he was feeling after sleeping on some of the questions and issues that had been raised the night before. Jay assured him that my party had been just what he had needed.

A couple of months later, I found out what Jay was really thinking that night. When we met again he put it like this: "I knew I had a lot going for me in my life. Two beautiful little kids, a growing business and a wonderful wife that stood by me in hard times. We were on the upswing. I was a recovering alcoholic and had been turned around for four years. Compared to other times, everything was great. Everything that is, except for a huge hole in my heart. I had known for some time that something was still missing."

"That night when I sat in that chair and listened to the

Word, I looked across the room at all of those other people. Seeing their faces made me realise what it was. They had a relationship that I didn't have. When I saw that, I said, 'This is what's missing. This is where I belong, right here. This is the real party.'"

After that party, Jay was invited to lunch by a friend of mine and came to Christ within a week.

But this wasn't quite the end of the going-away festivities that David and Ann arranged for me that summer. When my project in that part of Louisiana ended two days later, my mom and dad drove over before I left because Dad wanted to see me one more time. The three of us had a two-hour lunch, which Ann herself prepared.

As Dad dropped me off at my truck, we hugged. "Goodbye Dad, it's been a great summer."

"Yes," he said. "Good-bye. I love you."

As I turned to walk away, I stopped and looked back to tell him one more time that I loved him. I couldn't hear his reply but I saw him smile through the windshield of his car, and I read his lips as he said, "I love you, too."

He and Mom then drove away.

Saturday morning I packed my truck and made the eight-hour drive back to Atlanta. Thoughts of the summer filled my mind. I prayed and gave thanks for three of the most memorable months of my life. The time had been full and the project was complete. Christ had been shared with strangers, and I had spent some important time with Dad. Now I was ready to get home and spend time with my wife and children.

Mary and I spent most of Sunday reviewing our summer. On Monday evening she prepared a lovely family dinner on

the deck. It was a special celebration for everyone to share their thoughts and thanks for the summer of `95. Over grilled salmon, each gave an individual version of the blessings that the summer of 95 had provided.

About 6:00 pm, as we were just wrapping up our family discussion, I slipped into the house to grab some tea when the phone rang. It was my brother Kirt.

His tone said it all: "Kel…Dad's gone."

We were both silent for a few moments. Two sons pausing for a moment over their father's life. Neither of us said a word. We didn't have to.

Then Kirt continued, "He had just washed his face and called out to Mom, 'Honey, come quick.' He died in Mom's arms."

Time and relationships trudge on. Summer, fall, winter and spring. Birth, life and finally death. It all continues in a kind of divine order, doesn't it? Sometimes the months and years pass quickly; sometimes slowly. At times, life is very intense; at other times, loose and relaxed. But regardless of the pace, before you know it, it's all over.

It's always painful to say good-bye to someone you've known, loved and admired all your life. There's no perfect way to prepare for that loss, no way to measure the pain. You simply try to cope, and sometimes, with God's grace, you do a better job that you ever imagined you could.

With His help, pain lessens with time. Hope and the assurance of meeting again someday cushion the devastation of grief. Perhaps most important of all, He works through those who were once strangers to heal the hurt of separation. A father may be gone. A husband, wife, child or friend may depart. You may begin to wonder if life is worth living. But

look around. Who's still there? People who were once strangers. But now, they are something much more.

Probably, at one point, you really didn't want those strangers at your party at all. You didn't want to deal with them because you didn't know them and it seemed to be too much trouble to make conversation or build a new relationship.

Yet, when we allow God into our party, we find those strangers can quickly become acquaintances. Then friends. And finally, perhaps even brothers and sisters in Christ.

In the end, He has invited us all to become members of His family, special guests at the great party of God. And in the end, it's the only family that will matter.

Discussion Questions

Chapter 21 – Strangers at My Party

1. What do you see regarding God's timing in this story?
2. Have you ever lost someone close to you? A parent? A friend?
3. Is it easy or difficult for you to develop new relationships?
4. "In the end, it's the only family that will matter." What do you think about this statement?
5. How did this story encourage your faith?