



# ***REFLECTIONS***

July 22, 2012

**Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you.**

*John 14:27*

## **Well with My Soul**

"It is well with my soul." These words whispered through the minds of all in the room as rippling piano keys streamed the melody of their grace. They rekindled a piercing sting in the hearts of some, emptiness of loss in others; but forgiveness and hope conquered both, and peace quieted their souls.

But where did the peace come from? Was it the same place that makes ripples from a flowing stream so soothing or the stillness of a lake in the dawn of a new day so tranquil? The restfulness of a gentle breeze rustling through the leaves comes from somewhere. Is it from the same place as the cheerfulness of birds singing in the treetops, or the assurance of ocean waves lapping onto a deserted beach?

God thought of everything in the beautiful world He made. He thought of the sun for its radiance, the moon for its comforting glow, the glittering stars to adorn a darkened sky. The land, the sea, the grasses, and the trees decorate our lives with his grace. But He made some things we can only feel.

He gave us joy that we might celebrate, sadness that we might grieve, sounds that stir our minds, and scents to savor the aromas of his creation. God gave us anger that we might rebel, and He gave us tenderness that we might forgive.

Free will is by his design too, though He knew our choices would sometimes lead to heartache and pain. So He offered us comfort through music we play, songs we sing, poems we read, and the soothing sounds that surround our lives every day. And He gave us each other that we might love.

So when pain sends its piercing sting into my heart, and loss empties life into the darkest cavern, I go in search of peace somewhere—a place to hear the river gently flow, birds chirping in the trees, and a gentle breeze rustling through the leaves. Then, with the faith of a little child trusting fully in the arms of those who gave it birth, do I discover God's love alongside, bundled in the world around me all the while. In him there is perfect peace.

And in God's perfect peace, it is well with my soul.

*You are the light of the world,*

*Richard +*

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# *REFLECTIONS*

July 15, 2012

**For where your treasure is, there your heart  
will be also.**

*Matthew 6:21*

## **Bedouin Woman**

Laughter only broadened the radiant smile across her face, and cheerfulness answered any question of regret about her chosen life. Sequins sparkled across the front of the colorful dress that matched perfectly with the luster of her personality. But neither the beam of her smile nor the brilliance of her clothing suggested that possessions were important to her. What more was there to need?

The presence of this stately, well proportioned matron, commanded center stage. A slight hint of aging painted wisdom in her eyes, and the shawl covering her head exposed just enough dark silver-streaked hair to accent the olive complexion toughened by the open air that she called home. The desert she chose as her land and the dark grey tent as a dwelling place displaced any desires for material things. The life she chose satisfied her needs.

We encountered the Bedouin woman after a long, hot, and dusty walk down a rugged ancient road that led us to a refreshment stand in a place called Petra. With strength drained, our tired and weary bodies welcomed relief from the heat; and the fresh squeezed orange juice, minted lemonade, and other refreshments restored our vitality. But the cheerfulness of the Bedouin woman captured the moment and personified the hospitality that welcomed us to a culture that until then we had seen only from a distance.

Bedouins are noted for their hospitality not their belongings. They are found herding sheep or goats along dusty trails, and living in black colored tents pitched on sandy ground or in caves carved into the sandstone hillsides that extend through the desert of the Middle East. We felt the desert's bareness, but Bedouins feel its riches—not for possessions provided from it, but for the joy they can bring to it. And perhaps we find a message there.

Possessions can become a form of keeping score and the pursuit of them unending. But as material things increase it is curious to wonder if we have come to possess them, or they come to possess us.

The Bedouin woman evidenced no hint of Christian faith, but maybe she had something right. The greatest treasures are not the material things. She treasured a desert life after all. From there she brings cheer and hospitality to groups of hot, weary travelers that add to treasured memories of a place called Petra—memories that can last a lifetime.

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# *REFLECTIONS*

July 8, 2012

**The Lord said, "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them."**

*Genesis 11:6-7*

## **A Common Language**

To an outsider the sounds that resonated through the small sanctuary might have been garbled and indecipherable. Except for the music that accompanied them, they may have been described as meaningless noise. But the rhythm of familiar musical scores bound the small congregation into a unified body that touched our hearts.

The setting was a small Angleton church in a little town in Israel. Our small contingent of American tourists was welcomed with open arms by Palestinian Christians who invited us to join in their weekly worship. The service was conducted in their native language but graciously also in English. The liturgy read and the hymns sung were simultaneously expressed in our respective tongues.

Unless listening to one's self, the words from the hymns and the liturgical readings were drowned into unintelligible noise—except that the last utterance of the liturgy and the last lyric of the musical score ended in near perfect unity. It was then that we heard the true beauty of it all. We spoke different languages, but the same words; we spoke in different tongues but worshiped the same Lord; we came from different cultures but all were God's children,

As we sang the hymns and read the liturgy, the scene of the first Pentecost came to life.

*All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.*

*Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. (Acts 2:4-7)*

We were all struck by the worship service that day. We felt welcomed by the hospitality extended to us, comforted by the familiarity of the service, and encouraged by the youthful age of the congregants and the numbers of their children participating. With the thousands of miles that separate our homes and the cultural differences that can lead to political divide, our hearts were warmed to discover that in reality we were one people speaking a common language—the language of the good news of Jesus Christ.

And through that common language, we know that nothing is impossible.

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# ***REFLECTIONS***

July 1, 2012 updated from the Archives of May 25, 2008

**Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain.**

*John 12:24*

## **A Celebration**

Cotton fields blanketed the dry sandy countryside each summer in the farming community where I grew up. So cotton plants offered no particular intrigue to me—unless, that is, the plants appeared in some unsuspected place as one did during a summer of my youth. Who knows how it got there; and who knows why it was not pulled up before we realized what it was. But that summer a single cotton plant appeared in the flowerbed adjacent to our front porch. It was to become my summer project and I learned a life lesson from it.

As I nurtured this solitary cotton plant, my imagination for it grew and grew. Even at a young age, I knew that at summer's end the plant would have journeyed through its cycle of life. It would grow tall before it bloomed. The blooms would become a host of nutlike pods that would soon dry and tear open to form a bowl that hosted the plant's fruit. But it was not the fruit of soft, snow-white cotton that had captured my imagination.

My thoughts were drawn to the seeds that were wrapped within the sinewy strands of each cotton ball. After all, it was a wayward seed that found its way into our flowerbed and my imagination abounded with what might come from it. Not the fruit, but ingredients for next year's crop to produce even more seeds until finally large new cotton fields would blanket the land—all from the death of a wayward seed. And so life goes.

We all have cottonseed stories to tell—the human kind. After all, we are seeds ourselves—each of us. While on this earth we have grown into blossoming plants, and we are producing fruit along the way. From our fruit more seeds will be born. The seeds become fields of flowering plants, and find their way into unsuspected places to bear fruit where we could never imagine. But it all begins with death.

A seed dies so a plant will grow; the plant thrives so flowers bloom. Blooms wither so fruit is born; and fruit ripens to produce a seed like the one that started it all.

Seeds are born to die; yet they begin the cycle of life. And death becomes a celebration of it.

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# ***REFLECTIONS***

June 24, 2012

## **Then Noah built an altar to the Lord**

*Genesis 8:20*

### **Monuments to God**

The entryways are bounded by stone carvings that represent our biblical past—images of people and events that honored God. There are hundreds of them. The carvings offer an introduction to the monuments found inside the walls of a majestic Paris cathedral called Notre Dame.

Inside this grand cathedral are countless other monuments that honor and symbolize love for the Lord our God. Stained glass windows disperse the light glistening through them to cast kaleidoscopes of brilliance into a sacred setting. Candles reflect the prayers placed by those passing through while bells ring in celebration and choir voices echo praises to God throughout the sanctuary. Majestic chandeliers hang from steep pitched ceilings that reach toward the sky, and altars decorated with precious metals offer invitations for prayer. All are monuments to God.

Notre Dame Cathedral with all these many monuments contained within its walls is itself a monument to God. Such monuments have been built in honor of our God for centuries. Solomon's Temple was dedicated to YAWEH almost 3,000 years ago; and even before that, the Bible records that the first altar to God was built by Noah after the great flood. These and many others have been mankind's attempts to honor God and to express love *for* him. But as magnificent as these monuments were or may be, none of them can adequately express the love *of* God.

God is love, the scripture tells us. No matter the beauty of them, colorful glass pieces bound together can't express the warmth of God's love. But people can. No structure, no matter its size or majestic design can convey the depth of God's love. But people can.

God made each of us in his own image, and He sent his Son to reveal his love and to encourage us to love the way He does. *"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."* (John 13:34-35)

Most of us will never have a hand in building monuments to God like those within the walls of Notre Dame Cathedral, or a magnificent temple like Solomon, or even an altar like Noah. But there is an opportunity for something even more. The greatest monument we can ever offer our loving God is to live our lives as a monument of his unending love.

For him there is no greater monument to build.

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# *REFLECTIONS*

June 17, 2012

**You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit — fruit that will last.**

*John 15:16*

## **Fruit that Will Last**

Some people hear the message of bearing fruit and some people don't. But each of us leaves something in this world that distinguishes our life, something that will be recalled, and lived again through the lives of others. It is a legacy; the fruit borne from a life lived. Some people hear the message and bear fruit that lasts. Helen was one of them.

Helen Johnston has passed from this world into the loving arms of God, but the fruit of her life can be witnessed all around. Those who did not know her may not be aware of its source, but they will witness it in the lives of Helen's family and in her many friends. In them her smile, her laughter, and her joy for life radiates from their faces just as it had radiated from hers. In them her caring heart reaches out and touches people well beyond the little farm where she lived her life. Such is the fruit of Helen Johnston. It will last well beyond the many years she brought it into the lives of her friends and family.

Helen was not a public figure. She loved the privacy of her country place set atop a gentle hill that overlooked the farm she called home. It was there that she would sit almost daily on her front porch swing listening to the wind blow and watching the occasional clouds drift by. From her swing she smelled the country air while she prayed for moisture to bring life to the crops, and she watched as the grasses grew, and the cattle grazed. In the distance she could see cars driving down the nearby highway and her small hometown resting on the western horizon. And even though alone most of the time, one can easily imagine her sitting there with a smile on her face even if God was the only one there to see it.

Some people just know how to find the joy in living. Helen was one of those. Few enjoyed life as she did; and she shared that joy with everyone she ever met.

Her family shed a tear or two as they said good-bye to one who was so dear to their hearts. But then the smiles returned to their cheeks. It is Helen's legacy. It is the fruit of her life—fruit that will last.

Today as the sun rises and graces the sky with golden light, we find a brightness in its beaming rays that wasn't there before. It is the brightness of Helen's smile beaming the joy, laughter, and love she has carried with her into her heavenly home.

And it will beam for years to come through all the lives she ever touched.

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# ***REFLECTIONS***

May 6, 2012 From the Archives of June 7, 2009

**The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in  
want.**

*Psalm 23:1*

## **Strolling Through the Psalms**

My grandmothers loved the Psalms. They were so much a part of their relationship with God. The Psalms are indeed beautiful, and like my grandmothers, I find it comforting to stroll through the Psalms from time to time.

Psalm 1 is a favorite. It sets the stage for the others in the way it describes God's blessing of those who walk with him and the way God watches over us. For the same reason I am touched by Psalm 23, the one we all turn to when we are in need of God's presence in our lives. King David must have found God's perfect peace when he composed it. What a masterpiece.

When strolling through the Psalms we discover the depths of all human emotions. Along the path we pass by a trickling brook and feel God's peace; we feel the blowing wind and his kiss touches our cheek. We face a threatening storm and see his attack against wrongs in the world; we hear cries of fear and listen to his voice of comfort. Our stroll reveals expressions of love, songs of thanksgiving, prophecies of things to come, requests for forgiveness, and solace in times of loss.

For almost everything that happened in his life, David composed a psalm. Each time the world became larger than he was, he talked to God through the verses he wrote. And it seems to me that King David set a good example for the rest of us.

Perhaps we are not gifted poets or song writers, but we can talk to God in our own private ways. We can reveal our weaknesses when we are plagued by the complexities of the world. We can give our praise for the love He gives; and we can express thanksgiving for the blessings he bestows. But we can also seek comfort from the Psalms when things are not going our way. That's what my grandmothers did.

When my grandmothers faced the trials of life, they would take a stroll through the Psalms. I think they did it right. Along the way, they heard cries for help that mirrored their own; they sang words of praise that expressed their joy; they found comfort that they were not alone in their troubles. I'm sure they felt God's love for the children He created, and they pictured his artistry in the beauty of the earth. They discovered his majesty when the Psalms looked toward the heavens, and they found God's perfect peace and love to face the daily challenges the world presents.

In strolling through the Psalms we find comfort when things are not going our way. God's love and peace are there to give us strength we need to face each day.

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# ***REFLECTIONS***

April 29, 2012

**Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.**

*Matthew 4:23*

## **Where Jesus Walked**

With no lack of trepidation, I await our planned pilgrimage through the great nation God promised to Abraham. It is the destination of Moses and the Israelites that they called the land of milk and honey; and it is the land where Jesus walked when He graced our world so long ago. There is such political unrest in the land we call Holy that it seems only natural to have safety concerns about traveling there. But political unrest is almost synonymous with the nation Israel. Turmoil has existed there through all of its history. So any travels through the Holy Land without the threat of danger would not be an accurate depiction of life there. And a depiction of life in the place where Jesus walked is, after all, the very reason for Christians to go there.

Without being there to see it all first hand, I can only imagine what it would be like to sleep in the town where Jesus came alongside his earthly father to serve as a carpenters' helper. I can only imagine the walk along the shores of the Sea of Galilee where he called Peter, James, and John to follow him; or to splash through the rough waves of the sea that Jesus calmed, and upon the very waters where Jesus walked.

But the pilgrimage will supplant my imagination when we walk the fields where the shepherds saw the star, stand by the river in which Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist, and ascend the mount that signifies his most recognizable sermon. We will walk the Emmaus road where Jesus walked unrecognized with two believers, and I am sure we will feel his presence as never before. And that feeling alone will make any trials of the pilgrimage all worthwhile.

Yet we know that Jesus is with us right where we are. He told us that He will be with us always, so we need not leave the comforts and security of home and venture into the uncertainties of a land in the midst of political unrest to find his presence. But though we know He is with us, when we walk where Jesus walked, we will find ourselves drawn closer to him.

And the peace from the closeness will overcome all trepidation.

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# ***REFLECTIONS***

April 22, 2012

**Give me a sign of your goodness,  
that my enemies may see it and be put to  
shame,  
for you, O Lord, have helped me and  
comforted me.**

*Psalm 86:17*

## **Road Signs**

The sign read, "Destination 70." Over the years the sign became so familiar that I usually ignored it. While Destination was not the actual name of the town, the sign let me know I was on the right road and the distance remaining to the place I was going. All I had to do was follow the road I was on for about an hour.

When there is a clear road to follow and there are signs along the way to provide information about the places ahead and the distance to them, travel is pretty simple. Most thoroughfares in our country are well marked with signs that not only tell us how far to the next town, but also that warn of rough roads, caution about loose gravel, and point toward detours to take. Follow the signs to reach a destination. It sounds so easy; if only the road of life was that simple to follow.

The road of life is not as clearly marked. Even what can be seen can vanish as quickly as a mirage in the desert. A path that is clear one day may be completely fogged over the next. Then there are the issues of road signs. Some are difficult to find; some are easily overlooked, and some seem to draw attention too late. But of all of God's road signs, perhaps the most difficult to accept are the ones that read, "Road Closed" or "Dead End." These messages may sound easy to understand, but they may become so familiar that they are easily ignored.

God's road signs are also ignored because the message is one we don't want to hear, or we believe we know a better way. But there comes a time when God's road signs are likely to become clear.

When we find ourselves retracing the steps that led us down a dead end street, it becomes much easier to pick up on the road signs that were ignored along the way. Hindsight is one of God's ways to teach sign reading. With hindsight, God's handwriting is easier to read; but of greater importance, hindsight reveals that God has been with us all along. That's the message He so carefully crafts in them all. He is with us always, and He expects us to find our way only by looking to him.

All we must do is follow.

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# ***REFLECTIONS***

*April 15, 2012*

**This is the day the Lord has made;  
let us rejoice and be glad in it.**

*Psalm 118:24*

## **Today**

As the sun's golden rays rise on today, the soft morning light offers freshness that breathes new life into my soul. Today is special. It is special because, "Today is a first [that] has never been before, and it is last because it will never be again." That's the way Fredrick Buechner describes it and I think he has it right. Today is special for me because God has blessed me to play a small part in it.

Today will bring newness into my life. I will hear words I have not heard before. I will say something I have not said before; and something I say will be heard differently than it has been heard before. Today will bring someone I have never seen; and it will bring some familiar faces that will seem different than I have ever seen them.

Today always promises to bring something new. Often the new things are filled with joy, prosperity, creativity, or renewed hope. Sometimes the new things are fraught with trouble, pain, failure, or despair. And within all of the newness, there is a reason for me to be a part of it. That's why God blessed me with today.

He gave me today to care for our home, to tend to its preservation and beauty. He gave me today to care for my family and to love them more than they have ever felt. He gave me today to smile at someone I have never seen and may never see again as they pass by in some public place. Today offers opportunities for small acts of kindness, to hold the door for a young mother whose arms are filled with children, or an elderly stranger in need of physical assistance. God gave me today so the loving glow of Jesus might beam into the small part of the world I live in even if it is in a way that draws little notice. He gave me today to live for him, though today will not tarry for long.

Dusk will soon fall and the golden rays that gave it birth will prepare today for a new name that will linger among the yesterdays in the annals of time. What is today has never been before and it will never be again. It is a very special day. The seeds of life planted today will flourish and blanket some part of the landscape of a today that is yet to be. And though the source of it may never be known, someone may pass along the smile they received from a stranger, or extend a helping hand to another just as someone once extended to them. Home will be a bit stronger because of the care given it. And if God's plan for me is fulfilled, the love of Jesus will shine like the moon and stars onto the family I love and into the lives of those God placed along the path I traveled today.

And that makes today so very special. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

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# REFLECTIONS

April 8, 2012

**He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him.**

*John 1:10-11 NKJV*

## Victory Celebration

*The light seems always brighter on this day each year, dear Lord. Each year the air is never fresher than on this day. Each year there is no day with greater hope than this one brings. It is your day, loving God. It is the day we are reminded of who you truly are. It is the day you conquered death. Today is our victory celebration.*

*Gracious and loving God. How precious is your name in all the earth. From you everything came to be; without you nothing would be. Without the touch of your hands there would be no earth, no people, no human souls, and no love. But through your love for us, you made it all. And we have come to take it all for granted.*

*Every day we turn away from you as if you were not there. Every day we fail to follow your commands. We fail to love others as ourselves; and we fail to love you above all else. Yet you still love us.*

*Because you love us you came into the world and walked among us, and we didn't know who you were. You taught us how to live, yet we have followed our own ways. You showed us unconditional love, yet our love is shallow and weak. We denied you those many years ago, and even though we know now who you are, we often deny you still.*

*Today we come to you in celebration of the time you walked with us in this world, when you endured humiliation, pain, and a tortuous death all because you love us. It was the greatest of human sacrifices that you laid down your life for us. You revealed your love by your death on the cross. But you overcame it. "Death has been swallowed up in victory." (1 Corinthians 15:54) It is your day, loving God.*

*The light seems always brighter on this day each year, dear Lord. Each year the air is never fresher than on this day. Each year there is no day with greater hope than this one brings. It is your day, loving God. It is the day we are reminded of who you truly are. It is the day you conquered death. Today is our victory celebration, for through your love, we have victory too.*

*"Thanks be to God! who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."<sup>1</sup>*

*Amen*

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:57

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# ***REFLECTIONS***

April 1, 2012

**“A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers... But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him.”**

*Luke 10:30, 34*

## **Microcosm of Life**

The morning seemed normal. People were moving about to and fro each living out their day just as I was; only for me a brief break in the schedule led me to a table in a local Starbucks. I was soon captivated by the life stories at play in the room that became a microcosm of life unfolding before my eyes. And no one seemed to pay the slightest attention to any of them.

To my right sat a trio of college recruiters making their pitch to a hopeful candidate. There were smiles and laughter in between serious questions and intense answers. The questions they posed to each other were answered with measured explanations, and from outward appearances, all were favorably received. Then the interview reached its end and they said their cordial goodbyes, the recruiters and the candidate both seemingly convinced they had made their sales.

Across from me standing in the order line a frumpy looking woman was giving hand signs to a deaf man seeking directions. I wondered how she had learned to talk with the deaf. I wondered where he needed to go, and I wondered if he would get there.

Then a mother and her preteen daughter went unnoticed as they entered the premises. It was curious that their entry drew no attention because alongside the little girl was a dutiful dog wearing a collar that read, “Service Dog.” The need was not apparent.

I watched in fascination as these interactions unfolded, and I could not help but wonder why no one else gave notice to any of them. Were they so absorbed in their own lives that they took no interest in anyone else? Did they not understand that the people around them are living out stories easily as important as their own? Those stories have joys to share, pains to heal, troubles to solve, and cries for help that go unheeded.

We live busy lives and face many challenges. But sometimes I wonder if we should slow our pace enough to pay more attention to those around us. At a table nearby there may be a hopeful student in need of encouragement, or a lost stranger looking for directions, or a mother in need of someone to simply listen as she nurtures an emotionally troubled child. The stories are there if we will but stop to read them.

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# REFLECTIONS

March 25, 2012

**As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy."**

*1 Peter 1:14-16*

## Holiness

Morning readings set my mind in motion. Most thoughts dance through my head without ever finding their way to paper. But that morning was different. Thoughts about holiness—what it meant, and whether it could come to be through human will—puzzled my imagination. So my thoughts began to unfold in my journal.

“Holiness is the setting apart by God, so holiness can be in all things,” I wrote. Then further reflection questioned if holiness can be in evil? Can God and evil co-exist in the same thing? Now my mind is really running. Does my sinful nature mean that I can never be holy? Does it mean that I can never *do* anything that is holy? Did God give us an eleventh commandment to add to the ten our sinful nature doesn’t let us obey?

Within me there is an ever present battle between my human nature, fraught with sin, and the will of God. It’s a daily struggle to let go of my personal desires and to allow God’s will to control my life. There is an undying part of me that seems unwilling to let go of parts of my sinful nature. So, can holiness ever be within my personal grasp? Apostle Paul explained it this way:

*Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God.*

*You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you. (Romans 8:5, 8-11)*

In Paul’s words, I found hope. With the Spirit of Christ in us, we are holy.

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*Richard* +

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# ***REFLECTIONS***

March 18, 2012

**Love the Lord your God with all your heart  
and with all your soul and with all your  
strength.**

*Deuteronomy 6:5*

## **Sacrificial Love**

Munna's fried chicken was a delicacy in our family. If we had had any marketing insights, Colonel Sanders might never have been heard of. I can still picture the family around the table with moist lips anticipating the treat piled high on the platter before them. And by meal's end the platter was empty, and except for the piles of thoroughly cleaned bones on them, so were all the plates. And Munna never had a bite of it.

Munna ate the feet. She left the good pieces for everyone else. In my life, I have never known anyone else who ate chicken feet. She said she liked them, but I think she ate them so her family could have the good pieces. It was an act of sacrificial love.

Love manifests in sacrifice. Where there is love, sacrifice is not made in the course of duty, or to follow tradition, or in obedience to command. Sacrifice is as much a part of love as those warm feelings from the heart.

Giving back to God is an act of sacrificial love; but too often we look upon it as a duty. We encourage the act of giving during stewardship campaigns, but it is encouraged more as obedience to a command. And I suppose that the sacrifices prescribed to the Israelites through the laws given to Moses were also perceived to be legal requirements imposed by God. God wants obedience, but He is really looking for gifts from the heart.

*"The multitude of your sacrifices — what are they to me?" says the Lord.*

*"I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of  
fattened animals;*

*I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats.*

Isaiah 1:11

God wants our love. That's what He asks of us. The best expression of it is found in the sacrifices we make. Munna's love was expressed by choosing the chicken pieces that no one else would eat. It was an act of sacrificial love, but it likely did not feel like a sacrifice to her at all. Sacrificial love does not feel like sacrifice. Rather it is a gift from the heart, given for the well being of another not as a duty, or a tradition, or a command.

Love the Lord with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. It won't feel like a sacrifice. It will feel like a gift from the heart.

And that's what brings God pleasure.

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# ***REFLECTIONS***

*March 11, 2012  
Refreshed from May 22, 2005*

**And when you stand praying, if you hold  
anything against anyone, forgive him,**

*Mark 11:25*

## **A Lonely Cry for Forgiveness**

The story about a broken parent child relationship was not a new one. I have known of it for many years and I have seen the dreadful impact of it. Only the bitterness and hurt from the estrangement of them have been known, not the cause. But the cause became less the issue than the deep, enduring hurt and resentment between them. I saw the pain from the perspective of the parent. How bitter; how abandoned; how angry; how alone. My sympathies first rested with the parent for that is where I heard the story.

The separation had lasted many years longer than their good times together. Then one day the child extended a hand in hopes of reconciliation. "Please forgive the youthful mistake I made," the cry might have been. The child had been alone too. The child had suffered pain too. The child was asking for the parent's love again. It was a lonely cry for forgiveness only to find rejection of the outreached hand.

When I heard this new piece of the story, I found myself forgiving the child even though I had not been wronged; and I found myself praying for a restored relationship between them. With the parent's rejection of the child's outreached hand, my sympathies for the parent shifted to sorrow. It grieved me to see someone choose the sting of bitterness over the warmth of forgiveness; to choose bondage over freedom.

The story is about bondage. We find ourselves in bondage when we are attached to a source so tightly that we react with its every movement. Bitterness toward another person is such a source. Liberty comes when we can detach ourselves from the source of our bondage so that we are no longer responsive to its movement. Forgiveness does that.

The tragedy in the story saddens me. As I reflect on it, the story could just as easily have been a love story. A forgiving parent would find us writing a happy ending. Forgiveness would not change whatever happened, but forgiveness could have changed what happened next. Without forgiveness bondage continues on.

With forgiveness comes freedom.

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# *REFLECTIONS*

March 4, 2012

**"If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."**

*John 8:31-32*

## **Grateful for the Truth**

Anxiously we had waited for the doctor to emerge through the door of the operating room. But when that moment came we could tell from the look in his eyes that the message he had for us was not one we wanted to hear nor was it one he wanted to deliver. His message described the reality of a life situation. His message was truth, though it fell heavy on our hearts to hear it. His message was truth though it fell heavy on his heart to tell it.

Truth is not always what we want to hear. Yet we say we are in pursuit of truth and profess to honor nothing less. But all too often truth carries a sting at its side. Of course, not all truth comes with pain. It can provide joy to one and upset to another. Truth does not promise to be without pain, and it is the sting that sometimes comes with it that causes us to avoid the truth or to deny it when we hear it.

Truth is not always what we want to tell either. Just as we don't want to feel pain, neither do we want to deliver it to someone else. Sometimes the truth can be painful to the party telling it. But truth is better told than withheld.

Just as truth can have a sting, it can also bring relief. Jesus said, "I am the Truth." And He told us, "...the truth will set you free." The burdens we carry are bundled in uncertainties and untruths. Truth clears the path and lightens the load.

*"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest,"* Jesus said. *"Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."* (Matt 11:28-30)

As we look back today on those final days of Mom's life remembering the message we heard and the emotions we felt, we were grateful for the truth. The doctor's message that day was not easy for him to deliver. He knew that his message carried emotional pain. Yet, as hard as it was for us to hear, the truth made clear the path we had before us. The fog was cleared and uncertainty taken away. It was a reality of life that faced us. And while we had prayed for something different, the truth offered a clear path for the days ahead. And we walked those days in a manner that only truth would have ever allowed.

We found Truth himself by our sides; and in him we found rest for our souls.

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# ***REFLECTIONS***

February 26, 2012

**Whoever loves money never has money  
enough;  
whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with  
his income.**

*Ecclesiastes 5:10*

## **It's Called Joy**

“Another day, another dollar.” It’s a common phrase to describe the daily toils of life on earth and the rewards we receive from them. The phrase may be an expression of satisfaction for a job well done or a wage well earned; or maybe it expresses discontent with progress toward something greater to achieve. But however the expression may be used, most of us work to gain more than we have so we can take greater pleasure in our time away from it.

“What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world...” Jesus said. But most of us are not out to conquer the world. Our desires are more modest. We only seek more than we already have. So our lives follow a path to add more to whatever we have with little thought to its endlessness or even the true reason that we feel that what we have is not enough.

There will always be something to add to what is there and there is no true luxury until the missing is possessed. But luxury is fleeting. Luxury is no longer luxury when it becomes ordinary to the person possessing it.

So life can become the endless pursuit of adding possessions; and it leads to nowhere. Solomon found that to be true and he felt compelled to share the futility of it.

*“I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind,”* Solomon wrote.<sup>2</sup> But when meaning is attached to our pursuits there can be a gratifying reward at the end. It’s called joy.

Joy is a gift from God. He blesses us with joy not from what we possess but from what we give. Is there anything more gratifying than to smile at a small child and receive a smile in return? Is there anything more gratifying than to extend a helping hand to someone in need and see their grateful eyes say thank you? Is there any greater reward than to give your heart to the one you love and find their heart given to you in return?

Joy is a gift from God in this earthly life. Sometimes possessions become a barrier to it, but worldly possessions are never a condition for it.

Joy comes to us bundled in a special package; and the package is God’s love.

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<sup>2</sup> Ecclesiastes 1:14

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# ***REFLECTIONS***

February 19, 2012

**And hope does not disappoint us, because  
God has poured out his love into our hearts  
by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.**

*Romans 5:5*

## **Winds of Change**

At least a little happens every day. A hair falls that is not replaced; another one turns gray. Wrinkles form; others deepen. New relationships are made, and others are broken. Fresh opportunities are presented; some are missed.

Buildings that once stood as landmarks lose their place to modern design; business institutions that once seemed invulnerable fail or become absorbed into even stronger ones. And relationships with people are changed by circumstances and the end of life. Winds of change blow through our lives. What once was is swept away and replaced by innovation, fresh looks, and advanced knowledge. Sometimes we like the new; but we still try to cling to what once was. Sometimes we cling too long.

Most of us resist change, yet it is a reality of life. Besides, memorializing the past has its benefits. Relics from times of yore remind us of moments lived, journeys walked, and of how far we have come from eras past. Photographs help us relive beauty seen, lessons learned, love held, and joy felt. But clinging too much to the past is to resist change. Resisting change is to relinquish hope for a better tomorrow. It may also signal a loss of faith.

God does not ask us to cling to the past or even extend the present. That was the lesson Jesus taught in the parable of the talents.

*"Then the man who had received the one talent came. 'Master,' he said, 'I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. So I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.'* (Matthew 25:24-25)

He encourages us to build on what we have and to grow from where we are. He asks us to make discerning choices, but He doesn't want us to stand still.

Change does not mean that we must accept it with no discernment, or that we must turn loose of cherished memories. Those carry on to relive their joy and to provide their valuable lessons. There are mistakes to learn from and there is joy to replicate. Pain we have suffered heightens awareness of dangers to avoid. Joys we have had inspire us to share them with others. But avoiding change is to deny hope.

The winds of change sweep into our lives with threats to our ways of life, but alongside the winds are beams of hope. And hope does not disappoint.

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# ***REFLECTIONS***

February 12, 2012

**To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father — to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.**

*Revelation 1:5-6*

## **A Kingdom and Priests**

Billy Graham stood on a large stage before a crowd of thousands. His message that day was direct and clear just as one would come to expect by watching his crusades on TV. At the conclusion of his message Dr. Graham looked out to the capacity crowd and he extended an invitation to come forward and accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. It was amazing to watch the parade of people make their way to the floor of the stadium to give their lives to Christ. It was amazing to see his gift of persuasion and influence at work in the lives of so many. But the work with them had only begun.

God used Billy Graham to send the message, but as the thousands made their way to the center of the stadium to receive Christ, there were hundreds waiting to receive them, to pray with them and to help them map the next steps in their lives. And those next steps involved hundreds more to teach them, to meet their emotional needs, to love them and to prepare them to eventually go into the world to make disciples themselves.

Most of us are not blessed with the giftedness of Billy Graham. Few of us will ever have an audience of thousands or the influence to lead large numbers to accept Jesus Christ as their Savior. But some of us have the gift to receive them when they come; some of us have a gift to teach them God's holy word; some of us can encourage them as they face the daily trials of life. And some have gifts to equip them to go into the world to make disciples just as Jesus commanded.

The Lord has made us a kingdom and priests to serve God. Our kingdom is our sphere of influence. We all have one, only the size and nature of them makes them different. Dr. Graham had a kingdom of large stadiums and TV audiences, but yours may be simply your home where you are called to bring up a child in the way he should go. Or your kingdom may be your workplace where you are called to do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Or it may be an athletic field where competition is fierce, but you play the game with the call to love your neighbor as yourself.

Each of us is a kingdom and a priest—a unique sphere of influence with unique gifts that we carry into all the world and make disciples. That's why Jesus said,

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# ***REFLECTIONS***

February 5, 2012

**I love the Lord, for he heard my voice;  
he heard my cry for mercy.  
Because he turned his ear to me,  
I will call on him as long as I live.**

*Psalm 116:1-2*

## **Separation of Time**

Years had passed, twenty of them. I felt anxious about seeing everyone again after all those years, but I also felt excited about it. I wondered how everyone might have changed. I wondered how changed they might find me to be. I wondered if those old feelings we had for each other, some warm and some tense, would be the same.

Most of us can recall such an experience, the meeting with a once good friend, or classmate, or old flame who from the separation of time had become a stranger when next you met. Whatever had connected you with them before did not connect you still.

Yet the meeting would neither feel like meeting a present-day friend nor meeting a stranger for the first time. There was uneasiness that both of you felt, but neither would mention it or quickly overcome it.

Time, the effects of it, is hard to explain. It often serves as a great healer, overcoming grief, pain, and hopelessness. But it also brings about separation. With the passage of time feelings reduced almost to memory, both bitter and sweet, are not quickly or easily rekindled.

So that class reunion, the first one for me, introduced all of those feelings. With some of my classmates it didn't take long to pick up where we had left off. But others were more like tip toeing across a sensitive surface, trying to find a place to begin—not knowing how to start fresh, but hoping not to begin where it was before.

Separation from God can be like that too. Most of us go through a time, fueled by self-sufficiency, when we are consumed by matters of life, and God is not a part of them. After separation of time from him, a meeting will feel as that of a stranger, uneasy, distant, unworthy—wondering how changed He might find us to be. And though the bond with God is easily restored, it is much easier to stay connected and not allow there to be a separation of time in the first place.

But either way, say a prayer today—even if it is only to say I love you.

Especially if it is to say I love you.

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# ***REFLECTIONS***

January 29, 2012

**Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.**

*Colossians 3:2-3*

## **The Race**

It was a rainy day and the track was mired in mud as we prepared to race for the district championship. But one full lap with poor track conditions would not be my greatest challenge that day. My lane position was. I had drawn the outside lane and that placed my opponents in staggered lanes behind me where I was unable to see them. With my competition blocked from view I was unable to measure my pace against theirs. So coming out of the first turn, I could hear Johnny breathing at my left shoulder. At the time I didn't fully realize how far behind him I was, but soon it became a stark reality.

The race must have been exciting for the spectators as Johnny and I raced in perfect step down the backstretch and into the final turn. It was there that I kicked my pace into a higher gear to emerge from the final turn with Johnny and I still stride for stride. The spikes on our shoes were slinging mud onto our backs as we both strained to hold our positions, but in the final few yards my endurance failed. Johnny won the race.

There is not enough space on the page to tell all of the lessons I have taken away from that day. I am learning from it still. But the lesson that lingers in my mind is the resemblance of that race around the track with our life journeys through this world.

The race with Johnny was run on a mud mired track. We ran hard and gave it all we had as if the only thing that mattered was who finished first. But later I realized that when we reached the finish line, the oval track had returned us back where we had begun.

Too often we live life like it is a track meet. We race about on the surface of the earth as if our lives depend on the order of finish. But the track condition doesn't matter; and it doesn't matter whether we run, east, west, north, or south, the surface only takes us back to where we started. The only point of the race against our fellow runners is who among us finishes first. But there is another dimension we can choose.

Just as the ocean is deep, so is the world we journey through. We seem to avoid going deep maybe because it is not popular to go there, or because of what it will reveal about us, but there is a source of life beneath the surface. Only by going there can we find it. Going deep into life may not be popular and it may reveal our human failings, but if we picture life in the shape of our planet, then once we reach the deepest point, we begin to rise again to come up on the other side.

And that is what the journey through life is toward.

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# ***REFLECTIONS***

January 22, 2012

**let your light shine before men, that they  
may see your good deeds and praise your  
Father in heaven.**

*Matthew 5:16*

## **Inspiration**

Each day offers something to learn. Something new will happen, or we may hear a story that we have not heard before, or an old one that has a lesson that was overlooked the first time. Sometimes what we learn may change our lives. So it was one day in a college English class so many years ago.

“I am a part of everyone I ever met,” were the poet’s words as I remember them now. They stated a truth that struck me with a thud, but it was many years before they became an inspiration to me. The inspiration did not come from the sum of those whose lives indwell me. Rather, I was inspired by the reality that *my* life will become a part of the lives of others.

If I am a part of everyone I have ever met, then a little part of me indwells everyone I meet along my journey through this life. And that assignment carries with it a formidable responsibility; yet it also offers an engaging opportunity. Everyone I ever meet offers a possibility to bring something meaningful into their lives, to add a new dimension, to reveal Christ.

So, today as I think of those I have met along my pilgrimage, I shudder at the opportunities missed and even worse, that many of them carried away nothing good. But I pray that some of them have. And I pray for my life to reflect the Savior so those I have yet to meet will one day welcome Jesus Christ into their lives.

The words from a poem gave me a fresh meaning for my life. They gave me inspiration for the way I try to live. From them it was easy to see that our lives are intertwined in ways that make us one, and how God can use each of us as a light in the world. But the poet had a message I previously overlooked.

The words came from a poem I do not otherwise recall, written by a poet I never met and whose name I can’t remember. Yet the poet reached into my life and helped me see that the glow of our light in the world lingers longer and reaches further than any of us will ever know. It shines into the lives of everyone we ever meet.

And it shines into the lives of many we will never know.

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# ***REFLECTIONS***

January 15, 2012

**I AM WHO I AM.**

*Exodus 3:14*

## **Wonders**

If a definition of wonder is something of nature that can't be easily explained, then Giant's Causeway must rank high on the wonders list. It would be a wonder even if it was manmade; but it isn't. Almost perfectly hexagon-shaped columns rise out of an area of the Northern Ireland sea coast to form one of nature's phenomena. Some columns rise only to heights just above the water's level providing the appearance of stepping stones into the sea. Thousands of other columns rise to varying heights presenting the image of stacks of poker chips waiting to be put in play.

Places like Giant's Causeway put me in a state of wonder, and I seem to find myself in that state a lot. A state of wonder is to gaze into the unexplained and the unexplainable. I wonder how nature can create the symmetry of Giant's Causeway. And I wonder about such things as why/how/what makes children grow? I wonder what makes them stop. Both are natural; both are expected. Neither is easily explained or understood. The growth of children is a wonder. And it is a wonder that their growth comes to an end. Both are true. We see it every day.

All of God's creation is a wonder. The life we see around us seems ordinary because we see it every day. Sometimes science offers explanations; but there is wonder in science too. How did science come to be? It is all a wonder. But it is true. We see it every day.

Wonders are unexplainable. But they are true. Wonders often exceed the ordinary. But wonders may also be common simply because there is no clear explanation why, or how, or what made them be. God is one of those. His being is beyond understanding. But God is true. We feel his presence every day. He is the answer to all wonders of the world. And as for the wonder of him?—well, it begins with his ever-present name.

His name is I AM.

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# ***REFLECTIONS***

January 8, 2012

**Now you are the body of Christ, and each one  
of you is a part of it.**

*1 Corinthians 12:27*

## **Mission to Planet Earth**

It all began as a remote scene in Bethlehem at a place intended for animals, not people. Except for a select few who saw the star and followed it, the scene went mostly unnoticed. Even those few who came to see the newborn seemed to soon forget what they saw, especially *who* they saw. But those who witnessed the child and spread the news are not the story. Jesus is.

God sent Jesus on a mission to planet earth. He came as a man because that is the only form he would be understood. Only in human form would people stop to listen to his teaching. Only in human form could the impact of his suffering on the cross be felt. Only in human form could his death and resurrection bring hope that death will not prevail.

God sent Jesus on a mission to planet earth. But do we ever pause to wonder if He has assigned us a mission too? Like Jesus, our births drew little public notice. Most who did notice soon forgot what they saw, and many of them, *who* they saw. But obscurity from the public eye does not diminish the importance of the mission God has for us on planet earth.

Yes, we seem to be much like everyone else. But equality among men is what makes people listen to what we say. Equality among men is the reason people watch the way we worship God, reveal love, and respond to suffering. And though our lives may be small in relation to the world, there *is* an audience we play to and that audience is paying close attention.

God sent Jesus on a mission to planet earth. He is still the story. But God has sent you and me on a mission too. He sent Jesus to die for us. God sent us to live for him.

*We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.* (Romans 12:6-8)

God has sent us on a mission to planet earth. It requires the gifts of each of us to get it done. May we all do our part.

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# REFLECTIONS

**The Lord is my strength and my song;  
he has become my salvation.**

*Psalms 118:14*

## New Year's Prayer

*Gracious and loving God, we come to you today at the beginning of a New Year. We enter it with the freshness of a new birth. It is a time when much of the old has been washed away and in some ways our slates are wiped clean. But everything is not new.*

*We carry into it illnesses that weaken us, broken relationships that divide us, and wars that place many in harm's way. Even still, the New Year brings with it our hope for a better world.*

*Our needs exceed our abilities to meet them without your power to heal, shelter to protect, and love to bring us peace. So Loving God, even with all our human frailties, scars, and uncertainties at this new beginning, we come to you as newborn children.*

*We come to you to ask for peace in our war-torn world. We ask not only for the end of the wars that threaten the lives of so many, but also for a peace that can only come through your loving hands. Help us to release the pride that causes us look to ourselves as the source of strength; and to rid ourselves of desires for possession, position, and power that have crept into our lives as the gods we worship in place of you.*

*Gracious God, we seek your forgiveness for the wrongs we have done to you and to our fellow man. We seek your help to release our resentments toward those who have hurt us and to seek forgiveness from those whose lives we have wounded by word or deed. Help restore broken relationships through a reconciliation that will help us love each other as you have called us all to do.*

*We ask you for healing of the diseases that reduce the quality of life we seek and threaten the breath of life you have so graciously given. Yet, even as we ask for good health, we submit to your will fully knowing that you will not ask more of us than we can bear.*

*But most of all, Loving God, we seek to live our lives as you would have us live—to love you with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our strength and with all our mind; and, to love our neighbor as ourselves. Help us to turn our lives toward your Son, Jesus the Christ, for only by facing toward him can our lives reflect the Savior. And it is in his holy name that we pray.*

*Amen*

*“You are the light of the world.”*

*Richard +*

[www.reflectingthesavior.org](http://www.reflectingthesavior.org).