



Foreword

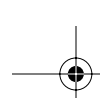


IT'S ABOUT TWENTY-FIVE YEARS IN THE FUTURE. ON THE SHADY SIDE OF the town square of Franklin, Tennessee, sit about half a dozen older men. We sit there counting out-of-state license plates and talking about times gone by, of people and places and things that have happened to us as a company of committed brothers in the Lord.

Denny is there, complaining about his back but forever answering every query with the phrase “Blest by the Almighty.” The rest of us roll our eyes—not doubting that he has been blessed, for indeed he has, but we have heard this well-worn phrase for almost forty years now. For all the decades we’ve known him, even in the midst of extreme suffering, this has always been his response to us. We’ve come to realize that even as Denny has been blessed by the Almighty, so we have been blessed by Denny. Even approaching ninety, the fire still burns in his eyes. “I’ll still roll you up!” he good-naturedly threatens any of us who dare challenge him.

Mike Smith is there when he can make it. He remains the para-





digm pastor of our group. He is still often off somewhere framing additions for his parishioners when his arthritis isn't bothering him, or helping a single mom get her car started, or repairing a leaking faucet, or any of a limitless number of simple tasks by which he washes all our feet with the gospel. He is in his seventies now but is nevertheless the most active of our little brotherhood.

Others come and go. Sam Judd still has a regular job and so can be here only on the weekends, though he still comes for prayer on Thursdays. Hewitt Sawyers is a regular. The story of his conversion is still one of my favorites and so he tells it over and over much to our mutual enjoyment. Basically he came to faith due to the fact that someone blocked the door before the invitation. He had always been able to sneak out before the pastor called for anyone to come down to confess and believe. Hewitt was blocked in, so what else was he supposed to do? The absurd providence of it all still makes me smile all these years later.

Off to one side sit Scott Roley and me, both bearded and somewhat bent over.

"There's my car!" I wistfully gasp as a new Jaguar rolls past.

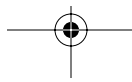
"You've already got a car," Scott whips back, a bit irritated. We've had this discussion now nearly a thousand times. "You're Toyota still runs fine!" He's getting grumpy now.

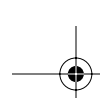
"But still . . ." I'm lost in the image of me driving such a beautiful car.

"There goes Maine. What is he doing down here?"

Fifty years ago some of us started praying that God would give us community. A little more than forty years ago, he gave it. It was nothing like what we had anticipated. Many dreams have been shattered in the proceeding years, but God has always given us better dreams.

It started when we pledged to each other that we weren't going





anywhere. We were going to resist the temptation to move away if better opportunities presented themselves to any one of us.

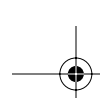
Later we promised that even if we disagreed with one another we would not break fellowship. Over the years we have disagreed a lot, sometimes along racial lines, more often between political positions. But the fact that we are all still here, watching cars go by, shows that our mutual promise held firm.

All during the fray, my friend Scott has been in the thick of it all. His missteps started it all. He came into Denny's predominantly black neighborhood with his youth group mowing lawns and fixing roofs as a summer project. Denny, as the pastor of the community, was understandably disappointed that Scott had not first come to him. But Scott had not understood. When Denny confronted him, Scott apologized with tears, and the two started praying together. And that was the beginning—God redeeming a situation that might have otherwise seemed unredeemable. We have prayed and wept together, married off our children and buried our close friends now for more than forty years. We're still not going anywhere. None of us is leaving.

But the sad truth is some of us have left, gone to be with the Lord, which, I realize, we should all celebrate. And a part of us did celebrate when Bill Lane or John Eaves or others "passed." But that forever human side still aches at the empty pew or the silent pause in our group prayer meetings when all of us sit and wait to hear the familiar voice of a brother whose voice we will never again hear this side of eternity.

Perhaps the best news is that there has been a steady stream of young people who've joined our ranks over the years. They are the ones who are in the thick of the battle now, who come back from the road with their own stories and requests for prayer. We, now the old guard, sit and listen and advise and pray for them, confident of the





One who was with us through so many of our battles.

Scott still lives in Hard Bargain, though the neighborhood looks nothing today like it did when he first moved into it. Slowly the little community has been renewed. House by house, family by family, a new hope has come into the neighborhood. In fact there is a growing movement to rename the community Mount Hope. That better describes it now. A new hope has slowly begun to take root in the community, a hope that Scott Roley has been talking about all these years.

“California. Can you imagine driving all that way?” Denny talks as if he had just driven all that way.

“Isn't this Thursday?”

“No, you old fool, it's Friday.”

In fact, it is Thursday. And if this issue can be settled before noon, we will all proceed down to First Missionary Baptist for prayer.

We are still the men of the empty hands. We are still bound to our promise to stay put and never leave each other. But our promise has held only because we trusted in the One who always keeps his promises. If any new hopes have come to Franklin, it is not because of our fragile fellowship but in spite of it. This the older ones of us know to be true. The younger ones are in the process of learning the truth of it for themselves.

We settle that it is indeed Thursday. Our little group of old men in baggy pants trudge off, down West Main, to continue our simple task of changing the world.

Michael Card

