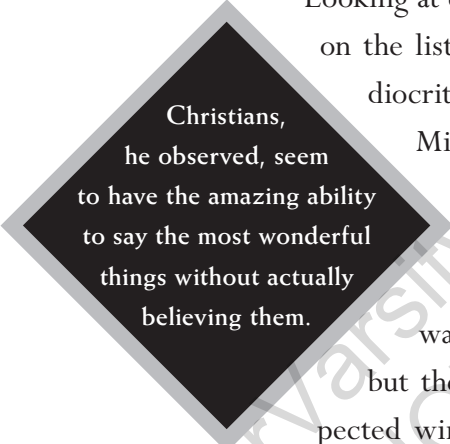


Going on the Journey but Missing the Adventure

EVEN THOUGH I READ THE WORDS ALMOST twenty-five years ago, I can still picture them upon the page. The words were and have remained so disturbing to me that I remember exactly where I was when I read them. I was a freshman in college sitting up late one night in the dorm laundry room waiting for my clothes to dry and reading John Stuart Mill's essay "On Liberty." Writing in 1859, Mill was trying to explain the process by which words lose their meaning, and he casually offered that the best example of this phenomenon was Christians. Christians, he observed, seem to have the amazing ability to say the most wonderful things without actually believing them.

What became more disturbing was his list of things that Christians, like me, actually say—like, blessed are the poor and humble; it's better to give than receive; judge not, lest you be judged; love your neighbor as yourself, etc.—and examin-

ing, one by one, how differently I would live my life if I actually believed such things. As Mill concluded, “The sayings of Christ co-exist passively in their minds, producing hardly any effect beyond what is caused by mere listening to words so amiable and bland.”



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Looking at each of the glorious declarations on the list and at the corresponding mediocrity of my own daily character, Mill’s observation seemed simply and clearly true. What ended up surprising me, however, was what followed—which was not a rush of guilt or despair, but the opening of a fresh and unexpected window of hope. Perhaps my life need not be, in fact, so manifestly shriveled and mediocre if I began to act as if what Jesus said were actually true.

Sometimes the teachings of Jesus are hard to believe, and sometimes they are simply hard to understand. One of his teachings that has always been nice to read but difficult for me to understand is the sweet Gospel vignette of Jesus admonishing his disciples for failing to see the value of children, saying, “Let the little children come to me,” and declaring, “the kingdom of God belongs to such as these” (Luke 18:16).

If ever a teaching of Jesus qualified for the designation “amiable and bland,” and threatened to have no discernible effect upon

me at all, perhaps this is it. On the other hand, over time, I have found Jesus saying something in this story that has the power to utterly change my life. That is, if I were to live as if what he said were actually true.

Here then is the story.

People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it” (Luke 18:16-17). And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them.

What does Jesus mean when he says we will never enter the kingdom of God unless we receive it like a child? And how would it change our lives if we lived as if this were true?

First, let's establish what it does not mean. *Receiving the kingdom of God* in Jesus' teachings does not mean simply receiving the salvation of the life hereafter. It certainly does include that, but it also means receiving and living in the kingdom and rule of God *now*. As Dallas Willard has described well:

New Testament passages make plain that this kingdom is not something to be accepted now and enjoyed later, but something to be *entered* now; it is something that already has flesh and blood citizens who have been transformed into it and are fellow workers in it.

The *complete* rule of God's kingdom is, indeed, something yet to come, but Jesus continually beckoned his followers to enter daily into his rule and reign. And as earnest Christians, you and I are rightly yearning to walk in the way of Jesus, to experience the intimate presence of almighty God, to live daily in a completely different way because we know Jesus. In a word, we want to live *alive* to God.

This, I think, is what we all want. But how do we get to live like that? The answer, says Jesus, is by coming to him like a little child.

COME AS A CHILD

How does a child come to Jesus? To be straight and plain about it—a child comes in weakness, vulnerability and neediness. You come to experience my rule, my presence, my power, my life, Jesus says, when you come in the weakness and vulnerability of a child. Jesus makes this more explicit in Matthew 18, where it says:

He called a little child and had him stand among them. And he said: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." (vv. 2-4)

Here, of course, is where the whole thing becomes difficult for me—and maybe for many of us.

I don't like to be weak, vulnerable and needy.

In fact, my initial response is denial: "Well, I'm sure this is a

very encouraging verse for those who *are* weak, vulnerable and needy—and it’s jolly good that Jesus is on their side.” But I like to believe that my friends and I are cut out for more a muscular approach to the life in Christ.

On the other hand, I know Paul teaches in 2 Corinthians 4 and 12 that God’s power is made perfect in my weakness, that the power of Christ actually dwells in me in my manifest weakness, that my weakness is actually meant to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from me, and that “when I am weak, then I am strong.”

Of my belief in these familiar passages, Mill wrote 150 years ago:

[Christians are] not insincere when they say that they believe these things. They do believe them, as people believe what they have always heard lauded and never discussed. . . . They have a habitual respect for the sound of them, . . . [but] whenever conduct is concerned, they look round for Mr. A and B to direct them how far to go in obeying Christ.

And how far do I go? To be brutally honest, as far as I am safe. As far as I am in control. As far as the risks feel manageable. As far as my sphere of certain competence will take me.

And consequently, in my secret and most honest moments, I sense it doesn’t take me very far at all.

THE PARADISE VISITOR’S CENTER

One of the biggest regrets of life, I think, is a sense of having gone on the trip but missed the adventure. One summer when I was

ten, I was camping and hiking with my dad and two older brothers on Mount Rainier, a massive volcanic dome of rock and glaciers rising 14,410 feet into the clouds outside Seattle. The mountain creates its own weather, still steals the lives of scores of climbers and served as the training mountain for the first American team to scale Mount Everest. Below the tree line is one of the nation's oldest and most dramatic rain forests, with its absurdly giant Douglas fir trees. Visitors to the park can drive up to a breathtaking alpine meadow called Paradise, which averages more than fifty feet of snow during the winter and arguably has the world's most spectacular display of alpine wildflowers during the summer.

One of the ways my father expressed his love for us was to take us to such places and to simply walk—mile after mile—up into the beauty and grandeur of these sacred treasures. My older brothers would race up the trail to the next dramatic vista, leaving me behind—struggling. But Dad would always stay with me, making me feel like I was setting the pace and enjoying, I think, the sweetness of being with his little boy in the quiet of the massive mountain. We always went farther and higher than *I* would have chosen. But along the way, Dad was there—to steady me over streams, to feign the need for a rest, to help me over the boulder, to assure me I was almost there.

But on this particular summer day I didn't want to go on. We had been walking with hordes of tourists along the gentle asphalt trails outside the Paradise visitor's center, admiring and naming the fabulous wildflowers. At the top of the meadow trails,

however, the paved trail ended and a large warning sign indicated the beginning of the trail used by climbers on their way to the summit. With a text undoubtedly drafted by lawyers, the sign warned of every conceivable horror that awaited those who ventured beyond. I wasn't feeling particularly tired, but my little stomach ached as I looked up at the massive rock formations and snow fields that went up and up and up. My dad suggested we try to reach Camp Muir, the base camp used by climbers heading for the summit, and my brothers eagerly accepted. Dad assured me I could make it, that he would help me and that the view and the triumph would be more than worth the effort—and that it would be marvelous to do together.

I, however, was thinking that we ought to pay more attention to the lawyers who took the time to make that nice sign. After all, all manner of things could go wrong. *What if Dad is wrong and I can't make it? It will be so humiliating to be the one who needs help again. And what if Dad doesn't even know the way up there? What if it becomes too aggravating for him to help me, and I get stuck?*

With these mounting anxieties beating in my little chest, I responded the only way a ten-year-old can to such a proposition and simply said:

“No. That looks boring.”

Instead, I suggested, I'd like to hang out at the visitor's center. Indeed, the Paradise meadow had a huge and magnificent visitor's center with exhibits and video displays about the wildlife, the history of the mountain, the drama of those who had tried

to climb it, and even a wildflower quiz for kids that I was sure I could win.

Dad tried a few more times to woo me up the mountain and explained that it would be a long day by myself at the visitor's center while he and my brothers were climbing, but eventually he relented. I scurried back down to the visitor's center and was quite pleased with myself while they headed up the mountain.

The visitor's center was warm and comfortable, with lots of interesting things to watch and read. I devoured the information and explored every corner, and judging by the crowd, it was clearly the place to be. As the afternoon stretched on, however, the massive visitor's center started to feel awfully small. The warm air felt stuffy, and the stuffed wild animals started to seem just—dead. The inspiring loop videos about extraordinary people who climbed the mountain weren't as interesting the sixth and seventh times, and they made me wish I could be one of those actually climbing the mountain instead of reading about it. I felt bored, sleepy and small—and I missed my dad. I was totally stuck. Totally safe—but totally stuck.

After the longest afternoon of my ten-year-old life, Dad and my brothers returned flushed with their triumph. Their faces were red from the cold and their eyes clear with delight. They were wet from the snow, famished, dehydrated and nursing scrapes from the rocks and ice, but on the long drive home they had something else. They had stories and an unforgettable day with their dad on a great mountain. I, of course, revealed noth-

ing, insisting that it was my favorite day of the whole vacation.

Truth be told—I went on the trip and missed the adventure. And thirty-four years later, I still remember the day at the visitor’s center.

STUCK AT THE VISITOR’S CENTER

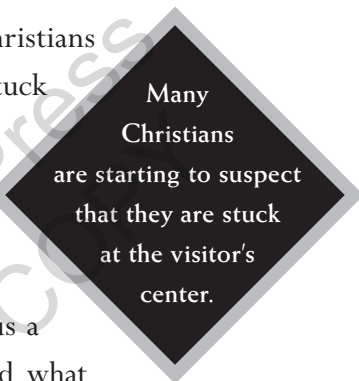
Likewise, it is my sense that many Christians are starting to suspect that they are stuck at the visitor’s center. They suspect that they are traveling with Jesus but missing the adventure.

In different times and in different ways, our heavenly Father offers us a simple proposition: Follow me beyond what you can control, beyond where your own strength and competencies can take you, and beyond what is affirmed or risked by the crowd—and you will experience me and my power and my wisdom and my love.

Jesus beckons me to follow him to that place of weakness where I risk the vulnerability of a child so that I might know how strong my Father is and how much he loves me.

But truth be told, I would rather be an adult. I’d rather be in a place where I can still pull things together if God doesn’t show up, where I risk no ultimate humiliation, where I don’t have to take the shallow breaths of desperation.

And as a result, my experience of my heavenly Father is simply



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impoverished. If I want to stay safe and warm at the visitor's center, I don't get to be with him on the adventure up the mountain. But he says his power is made perfect in my weakness, not in my strength.

Does this mean I need to abandon the things I do well? Do I have to let go of my sources of strength—my gifts, my passions, my training, my expertise? No, I don't think so. Those are good things from God. I think he simply wants us to take them on a more demanding climb, where we will actually need his help, and where he delights to grant it.

My difficulty is I either would prefer not to desperately need his help, or I would desperately like his help with things that aren't necessarily of *his* kingdom. (They are, instead, the things of *my* kingdom.) In both cases, my Father can't pour himself out in power because I'm either not asking for it or it would be bad for me. So I'm stuck at the visitor's center.

This is why I am so grateful for my experience with International Justice Mission (IJM)—because it gives me a continual experience of my weakness in which God is delighted to show his power. We are a collection of Christian lawyers, criminal investigators, social workers and advocates. We rescue victims of violence, sexual exploitation, slavery and oppression around the world. I started out as its first employee in 1997, and now we have about three hundred full-time staff around the world, most of whom are nationals working in their own communities in the developing world.

The journey for me has been incredible, but by far the most joyful, exhilarating and life-altering part has been the authentic experience of God's presence and power. I have experienced God—and that experience has come in my weakness. God has called us into a battle with violence and aggressive evil that, every day, my colleagues and I *know* we cannot win without the specific intervention of God. We are forced by our own weakness to beg him for it, and at times we work without a net, apart from his saving hand. And we have found him to be real—and his hand to be true and strong—in a way we would never have experienced strapped into our own safety harnesses.

In concrete terms, what does that desperation look like? For me, it means being confronted with a videotape of hundreds of young girls in Cambodia being put on open sale to be raped and abused by sex tourists and foreign pedophiles. It means going into a brothel in Cambodia as part of an undercover investigation and being presented with a dozen girls between the ages of five and ten who are being forced to provide sex to strangers. It means being told by everyone who should know that there is nothing that can be done about it. It means facing death threats for my investigative colleagues, high-level police corruption, desperately inadequate aftercare capacities for victims and a hopelessly corrupt court system. It means going to God in honest argument and saying, "Father, we cannot solve this," and hearing him say, "Do what you know best to do, and watch me with the rest." In the end it means taking that risky bargain and seeing

God do more than I could have hoped or imagined—setting girls free, providing high-quality aftercare, bringing the perpetrators to justice, shutting down the whole nasty operation, training the Cambodian authorities to do this work themselves and seeing the U.S. government be willing to pay for it.

DESPERATE NEED

In taking on the forces of aggressive evil, we have found a place where we desperately need our Father's help, and where he is delighted to provide it. This is not a resignation of my gifts or passions or training, but a deployment of those endowments to a place beyond safety, beyond my ability to control the outcome and beyond my own power to succeed. It's a place where God is desperately needed and a work in which he delights to engage—for it is his own work.

My colleague Sharon found herself in such a place not long ago when she and her colleagues were confronted with a man who was too strong for them. He was a powerful, notorious and ruthless slave owner in South Asia. When some of his slaves ran away—including a young father named Shiveraj—the slave owner sent thugs to kidnap Shiveraj's relatives from a distant village. They held them as hostages and savagely beat them as a way to force Shiveraj and the other slaves to return. IJM received the case and attempted a rescue operation with local police, but mistakes were made that risked a tip-off to the slave owner and possibly lethal retaliation against the hostages. Riding out to attempt

rescue, Sharon's IJM colleagues discussed what they thought the chances were for success. One of the most experienced local staff members pegged the odds at about 3 percent—and then added, “but with God, 3 percent can become a majority.”

Indeed, the God of justice was pleased to move on that day, and a series of utter miracles allowed the IJM team and local authorities to rescue all of the hostages and secure the release of the slaves. Sharon found the extravagant expressions of gratitude from the hostages to be one of the most overwhelming experiences of her life.

Sharon has not resigned her gifts and expertise as a Harvard-trained lawyer who once served with the Department of Justice's witness-protection program and as a litigator with an elite corporate law firm. Rather, she has intentionally taken those gifts onto battlefields where she knows she cannot win on her own, and where she believes God is pleased to stand with her. And she gets to experience God. Not without struggle and scrapes and doubts. But at the end of the day her cheeks are flushed, her eyes are clear, and she has stories. She has unforgettable days with her Father on great mountains.

But it's not just my IJM colleagues who have such days—nor just people who work in Christian ministries. I know a screenwriter and movie producer who has taken his craft into a battle for truth, beauty and authenticity that he cannot win on his own. He has cried out to God in weakness and has a blockbuster to show for it as well as a large collection of heartbreaks. But

he has stories and unforgettable days with his Father on great mountains. Likewise, I've seen a friend imprudently give away millions to the work of God's kingdom in good days, and I've seen his business collapse in bad days. But coming or going—he's never found loitering in the visitor's center. He's on the high mountain. Though he's on the mountain as a child—his Father is with him.

Another godly friend is setting aside time to care for her elderly father, while another has taken a season to make his wife's academic pursuit the family priority. In each case, they are in over their heads and they won't make it without God, and that's exactly where they want to be—because they live like they believe that God's power is actually made perfect in their weakness.

THE SOURCE OF ABUNDANT LIFE

How do we find that abundant, heroic life for which we were made? How do we enter in to God's kingdom now and experience the authentic power and presence of God?

We do it in weakness, and we are comfortable with (and even boasting in) our weakness because we actually believe that our heavenly Father is both all-loving and all-powerful—and that all is well as long as we are with the One who neither leaves us nor forsakes us.

Accordingly, I can take my gifts and passions and training and strengths beyond the places of safety and control, and into the sphere of the kingdom where I actually need God.

Perhaps the first indicator that I am approaching such a place will be seen in my life of prayer. Mother Teresa said that she couldn't imagine doing her work for more than thirty minutes without prayer. Do you and I have work that we can't imagine doing for thirty minutes without prayer?

If not, perhaps we need a new life's work. Or perhaps we need to do an old life's work in a new way.

I won't need to be in prayer every thirty minutes in my work if I don't really need God's power to get it done, or if it's work that God doesn't really need done because it has nothing to do with his kingdom.

At IJM, we begin every working day with thirty minutes of silence and prayerful preparation for the day, and then we all gather again for prayer at 11 a.m. We don't do this so much as a matter of discipline but out of desperation. We don't think we can do the mission God has called us to or love each other the way we ought to without spiritual resources accessed through prayer.

When we are following our Father on the great mountain, we want and need to talk to him. It's natural. It's part of the journey. At the visitor's center, though, there are enough things to occupy us that such conversation really isn't necessary—checking in every once in a while is generally quite adequate.

But I don't think we really want to spend our days at the visitor's center. To get out, however, we have to admit that it's fear and not cleverness that's keeping us there. We need to believe that the Father really does know where the joy is, and that it's

safe to follow him in our own weakness up the mountain. Perhaps then we can know the joy of going on the trip without missing the adventure.

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