

Following Jesus Through the Eye of the Needle

LIVING FULLY, LOVING DANGEROUSLY



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As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. "Good Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

"Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered.

"No one is good—except God alone.

You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do shall not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honor your father and mother.'"

"Teacher," he declared, "all these I have kept since I was a boy."

Jesus looked at him and loved him. "One thing you lack," he said.

"Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.

Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!"

The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, "Who then can be saved?"

Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God."

Through the Needle's Eye

REASONS TO FOLLOW (AND MAKE A DIFFERENCE)

The blue-collar, callous-handed guys roll their eyes as the well-dressed young man walks up. It doesn't help that his opening line to Jesus is, "What must I do to earn eternal life?"

"Of course," whispers Peter to Thomas, "who wouldn't want to keep living forever if your bank account will last that long?"

Jesus ignores his disciples. "All you have to do," he tells the eager young man, "is everything God considers good—all those rules Moses came down the mountain with."

"I'm faithful to all that," says the young man.

Jesus shoots Peter and Thomas a look. They stay quiet. It would be easy to mock this rich guy's self-righteousness, but they're also disconcerted as they recognize in him the same awkward mix of eagerness and desperation that started them trekking around behind a holy, baffling Messiah.

Then Jesus steps closer to the young man, leans in, puts his hand gently on the back of his head and whispers into his ear.

Jesus pulls back slowly. The young man looks up to find his eyes. Then his shoulders slump, wind knocked out of him. What did Jesus say? He looks again at Jesus, who stands quietly. The young man turns. He walks away.

I've walked away too. I've spent long stretches living with those same slumped shoulders. Other times I've tried to pull back my shoulders and do what it takes to follow. Neither is easy. Grace is needed. This story is about the stumbles and joys of trying to follow—trying to make a difference for other people and for my own life—instead of turning away.

The TV news shows and online news streams work to keep us riveted to tragedy after tragedy. Each upcoming story is crucial. Then fifteen or thirty minutes later, there's nothing you can do about all you've seen, which spans the country and the globe, except feel punished and depleted in mind and soul. And there are

the charity ads, the local fundraisers, the church announcements. There are ways to volunteer that feel meaningful, but how can it not seem too little? Focus on the demands of your family, friends and work, as if that weren't more than enough.

But it nags, doesn't it? Gets caught a little in the throat. Should I, could I, be doing something that really makes a difference? What would it look like? What do I really believe about helping other people, especially if it gets demanding?

And, really, can I just decide that I have to—that I *get to*—try?

For me, after college a mix of adventure, faith and idealism compelled me to work with a refugee ministry in Europe. I became friends with guys my age who had fled as refugees from ugly wars in Sarajevo or Sierra Leone. I sat with families torn apart by suffering and poverty that before I'd known only as headlines or political science topics. It was good and uncomfortable connecting to the world in a personal way.

I returned to the United States to study more. I married my beautiful wife. Happier than I'd ever been in many ways, I still felt like I'd walked away. My shoulders started slumping again. (This is where I should quote Mother Teresa on how our love for God and our love for neighbors in need is intertwined, but let's skip that formality.) There's a world out there with two billion people living on less than two dollars a day. Too many people can't find enough calories. Too many children live in virtual slavery.

And they aren't just statistics. I've played marbles with children who have never been able to spend a single day in school. I've talked with the dads out in the stingy farm fields. I've sat next to the moms cooking rice—the one meager meal for the day—over a pile of twigs.

So I moved to Haiti with my long-suffering wife (more on that later). We went with Beyond Borders, a small grass-roots organization that seemed to approach things differently. While this organization works on education issues, they take so seriously the idea

of not turning away that they offer few comforts to their American staff. We moved in with a Haitian peasant family twenty-four hours after we arrived in the country—with an overnight orientation, and then only occasional visits to ensure we were okay. They required us to move into this new community with only one backpack of belongings and no money except living expenses to give to the family we stayed with.

Our job for the first seven months was to start learning the language and culture—not from books or classes, but from the people around us. In a village meeting before we arrived, people were asked what they would be willing to teach us. At first they resisted—unsure about foreigners coming and also wondering what they could teach educated (and presumably rich) foreigners. But as the conversation progressed, they began to understand that we were coming as learners who were basically helpless and in their hands. People started volunteering: “I’ll take them out to the fields.” “I’ll show them how to cook rice over the fire.”

Now I’ve been working on education issues in Haiti for seven years—sometimes living there and sometimes traveling back and forth from the United States. This story is about the personal experience (more so than the work) of living in Haiti, where I began disoriented in that village.

What does Jesus whisper that I must give up so I can become more alive? What’s it like to love—and be loved by—other people in circumstances far different from our own? What are the benefits of trying, as much as it’s possible, to face suffering and find ways to alleviate it?

Of course I don’t have all the answers. This is an adventure in stumbling and sometimes finding. After the rich young man slumped off, Jesus said it’s harder for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven than it is for a camel to squeeze through the eye of a needle. If you’ve picked up this book, you’re likely rich by a lot of standards: even access to books and the education to be literate

can't be taken for granted. So you and I, Jesus whispers in our ears—and it seems worth trying to squeeze through the needle's eye so we can help and learn more about love.

Guilt, compassion, grace and trusting that Jesus invites us toward what is good—these all motivate me. It's not easy, and I've failed a lot. But I've also found something about freedom and joy that I never found in other ways—even though on the other side of the needle I also occasionally find a sawed-off shotgun aiming haphazardly at my knees . . .

Work out your salvation with fear and trembling.

PHILIPPIANS 2:12

Abraham fell facedown; he laughed.

GENESIS 17:17

OUTSIDE THE GATES

Jonas has a friendly, almost naive smile. I cringe sometimes walking by the sawed-off shotgun sitting across his lap—aimed too casually at my knees. From Internet cafés like this one to small grocery stores with less wares than a U.S. 7-Eleven, all kinds of Haitian businesses have guards stationed at their entrances these days.

I take a seat at one of the computers. My wife, Shelly, sits two cubicles down.

“Yours working?”

“Barely. Yours?”

Three of the seven computers work today. Not bad. The e-mail home page creeps onto the screen like a glacier, though it's sweaty in the Internet café and out on the Port-au-Prince streets.

We come here for an hour several times a week to work and stay in touch with friends and family. Jonas, the security guard, sits on his plastic chair just inside the door of this small room of computers and phones. The windows look out from the second floor onto a busy street. Tangles of electrical wires are suspended on poles overhead as people sell, walk, buy, push wheelbarrows, honk horns, laugh and shout under the unblinking sun.

Voices are getting louder outside. A demonstration might be coming near. We're just down the street from Place St. Pierre, a large public square where some of these have started as the political situation continues to heat up.

I look up from the computer screen and see the women who run the café looking nervous. One walks over to lock the back door. Jonas holds his gun as he stands to look out the front.

Recently I talked with a different guard at someone's office. I asked him how much he made—about sixty dollars a month to try to support himself and his family. That doesn't inspire confidence—and I hope he doesn't sacrifice himself for that salary if

something actually does happen.

The chants are getting closer. I call Shelly over to watch out the window as the march approaches. There has been some violence, but not in this part of the city. Being on the street as the crowd goes by doesn't seem smart, but I don't think there's any danger. Then thousands of chanting people round the corner with incredible energy.

Jonas locks the door. There's nothing for us to do but keep trying to work. The Internet connection is moving too slowly for Shelly and me to send flirting e-mails like we do sometimes. And what would I type?

"Hi, cutie. Ain't danger exciting?—Your loving, protecting husband."

She might not find that funny at the moment.

Then, *boom*. What was that? A gunshot. There's a frantic scene outside the door. Jonas is out there. He's banging on the door. The women unlock it. People are yelling. Jonas squeezes in, and they lock the door again. He's nervous. "They were crowding in on the balcony. I just shot in the air."

Okay, this isn't going well. We're trapped. I pray Jonas didn't shoot anyone. I pray that he'll put that gun down. Do I crawl under the cubicle with Shelly? Okay, I'm a little scared. This is stupid. I'm not outside marching, and it doesn't seem like my business. I'm just trying to send two-sentence e-mails about our work and the country. What do I possibly have to contribute to "development" in a situation like this? I'm busy wondering if I should take my wife and go hide in the bathroom and hope the crowd passes by and Jonas settles down. So this is how I'm trying to change the world and save my soul?



Half an hour later we walk through the normal bustle toward the pickup that, for seven gouds (twenty cents), gives us a ride in the

truck's bed up toward our house. My eyes scan for signs of danger—just like a Hollywood action hero, except that all I could do if I find danger is grab my wife's hand and run.

The trip home is fine, but the national situation keeps getting worse as a mixture of truth, lies and rumors swirls at increasing velocity: A body lies in the middle of a dirt road near where we live, tennis shoes poking out from under the cardboard and branches laid over it, flies buzzing around. Political demonstrations spin out of control as pro-government gangs swoop in with clubs and guns. Plumes of smoke rise from burning tires at intersections around the city. Roadblocks manned by angry young men pop up at random—they might take your car, or much more. A man in a wheelchair whom we saw regularly in the city on the way to work is murdered for his political views. Eleven radio stations are ransacked. Three foreign journalists are hacked to death by an angry mob. Whispers circulate that those in power are offering human sacrifices, including pregnant women, to spiritual powers. A French woman is kidnapped. The rebels are coming. Helicopters—an overhead *whir* that usually means the president is on the move—are busier each night. President Jean-Bertrand Aristide announces he will fight to the death. The CIA is the engine driving the rebellion. U.S. Marines come in to protect the American Embassy, and ships are stationed offshore to ensure Haitians don't escape to safety on South Florida's beaches. We receive phone calls and e-mails from incredulous friends and family asking, "Why haven't you left yet?" The "rebels" are coming closer to Port-au-Prince—and with them the potential for a chaotic civil war between insurgents and gangs, both heavily armed. Police strip off their uniforms and dash for the hills. Jails around the country empty.

Shelly and I face the decision of whether or not to leave. We've been working in Haiti just over a year. We talk with many Haitian and American friends and coworkers. All of them say it would probably be safe for us to stay, but wise to go. To one Haitian col-

league in our office I say, "It's awful. I can just get on a flight and leave, but you can't." The fact hangs there a moment. Then he shakes his head and says, "I know, but I'm taking my wife and two kids to stay with family in the countryside. Go. Go and come back, and we'll be together after things settle down." We hug and return to figuring out our respective plans.

The "rebels" have just taken over the north of the country without much resistance, and a clash in Port-au-Prince, the president's power base, seems imminent. The U.S. State Department issues a warning: "This travel warning is being issued to inform American citizens that, due to the continued unrest and a steady deterioration of the security situation in Haiti, including violent confrontations between pro- and anti-government forces . . . the Department of State strongly urges American citizens to depart the country . . . at their first safe opportunity."

Haitian radio stations and our neighbors are daily spinning out worst-case scenarios of societal breakdown. President Aristide predicts a "blood bath." Shelly and I talk every day about what to do and how to decide. I find myself awake at 3 a.m. weighing fears against ideals—not as an abstract exercise, but to decide whether to call American Airlines in the morning.

I imagine living with each decision: staying or going. I know going would carry some regrets, whereas staying would result either in no regrets or devastating consequences. We consider the possibility of Shelly going and me staying. Chances are that I would be safe if I kept out of the city. But maybe there is also the chance of a messy, prolonged civil war. Would people target me, a foreigner, on the presumption that I had money or things worth stealing? I couldn't do my job if it wasn't safe to move around. I could accomplish more from Florida. Or maybe this is all exaggeration.

Sleep is fitful, dreams troubled. I question my own integrity. Pride (it's pitiful but true) urges me to stay: I would secretly enjoy

being able to say that I had lived through a coup, which would somehow boost my legitimacy. Fear and the survival instinct—as well as the love that compells me to protect and be with Shelly—tells me to go. But I don't want to abandon the people I came here to live with and work alongside. But there isn't anything I can do in this situation. And so it goes, round and round.



The Christian home and culture I grew up in held in highest esteem missionaries and others who sacrificed on behalf of the unevangelized or poor in distant lands. Photos of missionaries were displayed on church walls, and most homes had missionary prayer cards on their refrigerators. *Through Gates of Splendor*, the account of five young missionaries who died in their attempt to spread the gospel in Ecuador in 1956, was popular reading. Throughout my childhood, heroes of the faith would occasionally sit at our dining-room table, and I would listen quietly, enthralled by tales of their noble adventures.

Through my experience, I'd come to dismiss the aspect of this faith culture that put these people on too high a pedestal. Yet I did sign up for related work. I had explored other possibilities in college, but nothing seemed as meaningful or interesting to me as serving people who most needed help, especially people in far-off places. After college a family friend (who had appeared occasionally at our family dinner table) convinced me to work with a refugee ministry in Western Europe, which eventually led me to Albania and Kosovo and now to Haiti, where I was choosing whether to stay or leave.

In trying to decide, I feel unable to find the balance between sacrifice and caution, love and prudence, safety and risk. My natural (selfish) inclination is to maximize my contributions to goodness while minimizing personal risk. (Which isn't to say I'm never

rash: just to avoid a couple of miserable, sweaty hours of Port-au-Prince traffic, I often ride motorcycle taxis without a helmet along streets where I've seen lifeless bodies laid out next to crumpled bikes.) My hope that life goes on after death and divine grace awaits should strengthen me to hold my life more loosely and give more recklessly, but I'm enough of a doubter that the possibility of death is still plenty daunting.

Becoming increasingly protective of my life comes from growing older and cherishing gifts like marriage, work, family, friendships. But this is potentially corrosive if it eats away at boldness in love. The world is in bad enough shape that it takes strong, risky action to make a difference, doesn't it?

A decision is needed. Airports are expected to close any day. The situation in the city is rapidly deteriorating into violent chaos. With the lights of Port-au-Prince down below, I sit on our porch vacillating. I want to protect myself and Shelly, but also to be vulnerable to love's persuasive power.



Choices both reveal and make us. There's time to get to this decision about staying or leaving, but first let's rewind to the many choices that led to this moment in Haiti. I had found my decisions being increasingly affected by two stories: The first is Jesus with the rich young man. And there's a second story Jesus told that I couldn't get out of my head.

A rich man dies and goes to hell. From there the rich man begs Abraham (apparently the keeper of the gate before Peter) to send over a poor man named Lazarus from heaven to put a soothing drop of water on the rich man's burning tongue. On earth the poor man had lain outside the rich man's gate. Dogs licked his sores as he lay there scrounging for crumbs, while the rich man feasted sumptuously. Sorry, says Abraham, no can do. It's role reversal now.

I heard this parable for many years and was unbothered by it. Sure, those millionaire-billionaire people are feasting in their towering homes, with luxury toys, with diversified accounts full of money. Sure, it's wrong when others are barely surviving in poverty. But growing up middle-class in South Florida, my attention was drawn to those who were richer than we were. Other families had boats or backyard pools, and we didn't. My friends were given cars when they turned sixteen, and I wasn't.

Then my eyes and my chest opened, and it became frighteningly clear: that story is mine. I'm the rich man, not worthy of a drop of water on my tongue. Though nobody would consider me rich in my country, outside the gates it's a different story. And the parable's conclusion and definition of justice don't offer much latitude or easy hope: Abraham tells the rich man it's useless to send a warning back to his family members who haven't yet died, because they wouldn't change their ways to pay attention to those suffering beyond the gates anyway. They would, in essence, walk away, like the rich young man who came to Jesus.

But Jesus doesn't seem to agree with Abraham's pessimism. In telling the story, isn't he hoping we might change, might awaken to how much is at stake *right now*? Quite a warning and an invitation—to try both changing the world and finding salvation.

FLIGHT TO HAITI

It was one of our worst fights. Shelly was ready to be engaged; I was in love but hesitant. She was going on hikes with mutual friends while I stayed home going over a book about war and extreme deprivation by photojournalist James Nachtwey.

I'd returned from working with a refugee ministry for two years after college, met Shelly toward the end of seminary in Princeton, started dating her, returned to work in Albania and Kosovo for six months, then moved back to Princeton so I could

be close to her. I took a good job but was left feeling numb because I didn't know what to do with those other feelings and conversations and experiences, like pushing a wheelbarrow beside someone who had lost everything else in the world except what was in that wheelbarrow.

I wanted to marry Shelly, but she hadn't met the same people I had. She didn't feel the same pull—though she was open. I didn't know how to say it to her, but how could I start down a path that could lead to a string of numbing jobs and binding mortgages and decisions based on what you have to do rather than what you believe in? Without giving myself any of the credit monastics deserve for their seriousness and without ever considering it as a possibility for myself, I felt like I needed to commit to all or nothing because I'm so weak and lazy that if I didn't enter a monastic-like promise of poverty and service sworn to the Almighty, if it wasn't marked daily by an itchy, rough-hewn robe with no pockets to keep anything in, then I was destined to constant compromise.

So I made a bumbling effort to say all this in what felt like a sensitive, honest way to the woman I loved and might want to marry, as we sat talking one afternoon in a room at our friends' place in upstate New York.

"Okay," she said. "So you want to get married. But first you need to solve all the great existential and practical questions of the world? Well at least that gives me a timeline." Then she threw a couch pillow at me. Then she cried. I felt like an idiot but still wasn't sure what to do.

Later she said, "If you're serious about this, then we do it together. No, I'm not drawn in exactly the same direction as you. But I'm open. And we believe in the same things. Can't you see that others do these things together and they're both stronger for it?" Her tone revealed that she was asking a dimwit.



We married a year later, and joyfully. But it did become more complicated. I was increasingly unhappy with not being engaged in these other bigger issues. Shelly had taken just a few short trips out of the country, but never to a place like Haiti, and never to live. After two years of conversations, prayers, occasional frustrations and dreaming, we made our way to the decision to move to Haiti.

My parents thought we were doing something relatively normal, if also worrisome for—and reason for much prayer by—my mom. Shelly's family wondered (at least it seemed to me) why their daughter had married a fool. Her dad had grown up in rural poverty after his own father died when he was twelve. He'd joined the army, become the North Dakota state prison warden and was respected around the state, rode bulls in an annual rodeo (okay, at least he wasn't completely sane), directed a ranch for at-risk youth, and expected one to always make judicious, long-vision decisions. Their conclusion wasn't quite this, but almost: I was taking their daughter away in pursuit of laudable ideals that should have been quenched with a Peace Corps stint after college; rather, I should be faithful to God in more sensible ways and take care of my family and the people I have direct responsibility for.

Foolish to chase ideals, but foolish not to. Foolish to take Jesus' stories seriously, but foolish not to. Foolish to let love be redefined by Jesus, who says you have no family, but everyone is your family. I had to give chase.

Twelve years earlier I had attended a Christian college in downtown West Palm Beach, Florida. I quickly became a business economics major. In my sophomore year I worked with a professor's help to resuscitate and become president of the campus business fraternity for two years. (It was our only fraternity of any type; this Southern Baptist–rooted school was no University of Florida.) Among the guests we invited to campus to speak and have lunch

with us was a boss of The Breakers, one of the best-known luxury hotels in the world, which was just across the intracoastal on Palm Beach. We got along well, and I even took a girl on a date to watch him play polo.

I usually went to church. Occasionally I went with my youth group leader to give out food to guys who lived on the street downtown. But I was more serious about becoming successful in business. Until a kind of prophet showed up.

He appeared at one of our mandatory chapel services, which also featured American Free Enterprise Day once a year. In this picturesque First Baptist Church, suddenly there was a speaker up there making us laugh with his stories and then asking everyone—including this president of the business fraternity—“Can you really be a Christian and own a BMW?” (Good luck driving that through the eye of a needle.)

He told about a student who came to him excited because he just landed a plum job for which there had been hundreds of applicants. The speaker replied, “Why would you take a job that 199 other people could do when there’s so much work Jesus is calling us to that nobody is doing?” These are basic Christian questions, but they’re seldom asked. His way of communicating them upended presumptions I was starting to work with. The grace, anger and love in his message kicked some new life into me.



In the years leading up to the decision to move to Haiti, part of what helped me wade through the guilt and hypocrisy was not pretending—to myself and to others—that it’s pure altruism. Rather, I could be honest about searching for more meaning but also committed to the hard work of making a better life possible for someone else.

So then one tries to follow Jesus by squeezing through the eye

of the needle . . . and then stumbling outside the gates. Spending time there. Finding people we'd normally be asked to have mercy on—and instead asking them to have mercy on us and teach us.

There are all kinds of ways of helping that I admire, but I'm drawn to the more extreme. Maybe it's like a diet: it's usually easier for me either to drink three Cokes a day or decide I'm not going to drink any Coke for an entire year. Reasonable limits don't work best for me. And it's true in my trying to follow Jesus too. I relate to the young man slumping away from Jesus' demand for everything, but I'm also profoundly drawn to Jesus' radical demands. They strike me as true. They're so hard, yet I long for the invitation. At this intersection it seems grace, work, freedom, obedience, sacrifice and joy meld into a simple, whispered invitation.

But then what kind of narcissistic, messianic, self-important, desperate thing is this—or am I? Sure, some heroes like Saint Francis and Mother Teresa do a radical separation so they can go further into the world, but they're saints, and they're a bit nuts, and I'm pretty sure not everyone is supposed to do it their way. I always find more courage to do what I believe or want to believe when I'm not alone. Shelly's the one I wanted to be with me. Here she was, married to and loving a fool—and wanting, like me, to learn more about love. So we drive to the airport. We board the plane for Haiti.

There is an old missionary couple sitting one row up, across the aisle from us. We joke in whispers about hoping we aren't now en route to becoming like them: she has a doily-type thing on her head, and their clothes and demeanor give a heavy, stale impression. Then when we land on the Port-au-Prince runway, the old couple stands up to get their carry-ons. As they wait to disembark, we're behind them. Shelly nudges me and nods her head downward. The old man's hand is subtly—but provocatively—cupping his wife's bottom. Shelly and I smile at each other. We're a little anxious, but we're together. We walk out of the airplane door and blink into the sunlight, our eyes trying to adjust as we descend the metal stairs.