

A Story for the Road

Semper Fidelis



The following is a true story. A story that is humorous, adventurous and utterly life-changing.

It begins on a cold February morning in 1969. The day I began serving my “sentence” . . . er . . . tour of duty with the United States Marine Corps. 1969 was a dangerous year for many young men in America for the Vietnam war was raging. Now, I can hear some of you enlightened ones saying, “Why in the world would you want to do something as insane as joining the MARINES, especially when at this time most of them were assured of going straight to Vietnam?”

Good question! My own honest but seemingly mad response was, “Vietnam is one of the reasons I want to join the ‘Corps’”. You see on the surface, I wanted to join the very best fighting force in the world in order to fight for freedom and kill some communists (*those freedom denying, God-haters who, only later did I find out, were simply more honest and open than I was in their rebellion*). That was the answer I gave then. Only later did I find out that there was a more sinister and deeper reason I joined the “Corps.” This can be summarized in one word, “rebellion” (*or in spiritual terms “cosmic treason”*)! I was about to be drafted by the Army. I thought to myself, “You’re not going to tell me what to do. I’ll show you. I’ll join the MARINES!” Only the logic of a rebel could come up with that one!

But my rebellion didn’t occur in a vacuum. This was the “Age of Aquarius”. I was living in the freedom of the 60’s. I wasn’t a hippie but I was just as rebellious, for I used this so called freedom to “smoke, drink, chew and go with girls who do.”

However, something began to trouble me during my last year of high school. My friends and I were exercising this “freedom” to its limits yet we were bored. Life just wasn’t exciting enough. We would usually end each late night out with words something to the effect of: “Boy, this is a dead town!” or “There is nothing to do!”

I couldn’t explain this growing emptiness in my life until many years later, when I found the answer in the wise words of Saint Augustine:

“You made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.”

But in 1969 I did not know this truth. And, I did not know that this “freedom” was a false freedom, the kind of freedom a junk yard dog has when collared by a long chain. Little did I know that at the end of this chain was the very enemy of my soul. This kind of “freedom” provided the perfect climate for me to get into a lot of trouble. It began with my parents and progressed to teachers, police and climaxed with the United States Marine Corps. And this brings us back to that cold day in February 1969, my first official day in the Corps.

It was here my life was going to be changed forever, beginning with a salty ole’ gunnery sergeant and a Bible. Now if you are thinking, you will be asking yourself right now, “What in the world does a salty gunnery sergeant have to do with a Bible?” Read on. This was just the beginning of several amusing, adventurous and utterly life changing events that I was about to experience.

You see, on this first day in the MARINES, I was about to learn one of the many important lessons on instant obedience and of the unfathomable workings of a Holy, Merciful and Sovereign God; the one who is in complete control of everything! Here I was, minding my own business, standing in line so that I may receive the items that were to go into my new “sea bag”: shaving gear, cigarettes, and a Gideon Bible (*The “Gideons” is a nonprofit organization comprised of businessmen who distribute Bibles free of charge*).

- -Break- -

*So that you may grasp the significance of what I am about to tell you, at this point in the story, you must know two things about me during this period of my life: **First**, at this time in my life, I did not consider myself the “religious” type. I thought the Bible and the religion associated with the Bible, was only for women, children and wimpy, sissified men. Only later did I find out that real men not only eat quiche, they also read their Bible. **Second**, even though I was a rebellious rascal, I considered myself an honest rascal and therefore would not take something I knew I would not use.*

So when this ole' gunnery sergeant gave me this Bible, I politely gave it back to him. Within a seeming nanosecond this gunnery sergeant had jumped across the table and was now only millimeters from my face, with his jugular veins bulging, yelling at the top of his voice, "you maggot, you . . . *(I am omitting the stream of expletives he also used)*! I gave you this . . . Bible. Take it you *(more expletives)* and get out of here."

Looking back on this event, I learned two important lessons:

- In the Marines, you never, never underestimate the negative consequences of delayed obedience and,
- In God's universe, you never, never underestimate the power and mystery of a Holy, Merciful, Sovereign God. The one true God who can use anything or anyone in order to get your attention and communicate, to the very depths of your soul, the realities of life and the certainty of death.

Which, by the way, were subjects I was going to think a lot about in the next couple of months as I prepared to go to Vietnam. Life in the Marines was about to change my life forever!

However, the biggest change occurred a year and a half later on Okinawa, a small island in the South Pacific that Marines used as a transit station between the United States and Vietnam. It was here I found out that I was being sent back to Vietnam! This news hit me like a ton of bricks because I had already spent nine months in "Nam" and was told I had orders cut to go home and be honorably discharged, for my tour of duty was almost completed.

Long hours of thinking and soul searching followed this news of going back to Vietnam. This was also the first time I seriously read the Bible. Yes, the same Gideon's Bible, that over a year ago, I received from God's unsuspecting evangelist, the salty ole' gunnery sergeant. This Bible reading and an honest assessment of reality forced me to see three truths about my life:



- 1) I was not the independent "free" person I thought I was. I did not want to go back to Vietnam. Yet, here I was doing exactly what I did not want to do . . . go back to Vietnam!
- 2) That "something missing" I had first noticed in high school had grown.
- 3) Looking in retrospect at my last nine months in Vietnam, I realized I may not come back this time. The prospect of death was very real!

My thinking intensified! My soul searching and Bible reading continued. As I earnestly read the Bible, I found some very frightening statements. But, I also found freedom, peace, and hope.

What was the frightening truth? The frightening truth was that most of my problems came from only one source . . . ME! I discovered that my disobedience to God was not only "cosmic treason" it was also like trying to fly an F-4 Phantom jet under the Pacific ocean using saltwater as jet fuel. My rebellion, which the Bible calls "sin", was just as burdensome and destructive to me as the Pacific Ocean is to a fighter plane.

And, just as saltwater doesn't give power and life to an F-4 jet but instead corrodes and brings death to its engines, so too was sin in my life. I discovered the Bible teaches in many ways that, "the wages of sin is death."¹ I also found out that I was not alone, "for all have sinned."² However, the most memorable of all these frightening truths was the fact that ". . . man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment."³ I knew that if these statements were true I was in big trouble, for I sensed increasingly that I was what the Bible calls a "sinner," one who has disobeyed or rebelled against God. However, during this time I also found several comforting truths.

I found that though my sin and its penalty is great, God is greater! For I discovered in the Bible that God sent His one and only son, Jesus Christ, to die in my place. I learned that Jesus alone paid the great penalty I owed because of my sins. It was also revealed to me, through the Scriptures, this was a gift and I could not add one

thing to increase its value: “he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy . . . so that, . . . by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life”.⁴

I also learned that I was fully responsible to do what God commands, to turn from my sins and place my faith in Jesus Christ alone for the forgiveness of my sins. I discovered later, that even in this action of repentance and faith God was at work, giving me both the desire and ability to obey Him. So by His grace I repented of my sin and placed my faith in Jesus Christ as my LORD and SAVIOR.

However, this is not the end of my story. It is really only the beginning. To my joy and sometimes great surprise, my life gradually began to change: First, I discovered that true “freedom” is not doing what I want to do but having the power to do what I was created to do. I learned that Jesus Christ is THE truth and only the “truth will set you free.”⁵

Second, I found that “something missing” in my life was gone and in its place was peace. This peace was present because Jesus was present. My resurrected King was now reigning in my heart by His Holy Spirit calming my fears and giving me His peace. “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”⁶

Please realize, this peace was in my life NOT because of a decrease in conflicts, quite the contrary! My internal conflicts were actually increasing as I gradually began to see the polluting effects of my sin and the purifying effects of God’s utter holiness. No, this peace and hope was present because Jesus Christ was present. “God has chosen to make known . . . the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.”⁷

This hope was especially evident in my next change, a change that allowed me to go back to Vietnam not fearing death. I learned that “he who is afraid of death will never learn to live.” I found that I could know for certain, before I died, that all my sins were forgiven and that I would go straight to heaven when I die. I know this because of what Jesus Christ did for me by His life, death and resurrection. “For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteousness, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit.”⁸ It was Jesus Himself who said, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies⁹ . . . I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”¹⁰

“The Story” is really not over. In the last 30 years I have labored in the field of medicine, as a pastor, and now as a missionary. I have felt the pain and grief that only death brings (*including the death of my second child*). Yet, because of my King and Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, I am still experiencing true freedom, peace and hope.

If your heart has been stirred by this story, I would love to hear from you. But, even better, let God hear from you! In prayer right now, I urge YOU to come to God in repentance and faith, for he “richly blesses all who call on him, for ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved’.”¹¹ But, . . . whatever you do, make no mistake, your reading this story was no accident!

To God be the Glory,
Pastor Campbell

1) Romans 6:23 2) Romans 3:23 3) Hebrews 9:27 4) Titus 3:5 5) John 8:32 6) John 16:33 7) Colossians 1:27 8) 1 Peter 3:18 9) John 11:25 10) John 10:10 11) Romans 10:12b-13

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