



Children of God

MARKKU & JOHANNA SARENTO

CHILDREN OF GOD

Markku & Johanna Sarento

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Foreword

It was about 15 years ago that we first talked about writing. Quite often, when we shared the story about our time in Canada, people told us we really should write a book. We also began to feel we should write down our testimony for our children, so they would know how God has guided and helped us. After all, this is their story, too, as they were with us every step of the way.

Most of the events in this book took place within one year, from June 1993 to May 1994. However, the book's theme did not take shape until quite recently. For the past year or so, God has spoken to us about childhood and the relationship he has called us all to step into.

As it was consistent to hold to one angle of view in the narration, we chose Markku's perspective. In the teaching, we have strived to focus on the topics that relate directly to our theme.

We all have our own path, each one of us. This is part of our story; yours will certainly be different. But God

is faithful and will always lead us as we rely on him
and seek his guidance.

Have a blessed journey!

Johanna & Markku Sarento
November 2015

*For those who are
led by the Spirit of God
are the children of God.*

*The Spirit you received
does not make you slaves,
so that you live in fear again; rather,
the Spirit you received brought about
your adoption to sonship.
And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father.'*

*The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit
that we are God's children.*

Romans 8:14-16

The Promise

“If you take that money with you, I’ll wait until you have spent it. Then I will show you that I can look after you.”

I stopped, quite surprised, in the cashier line at my bank. I recognized the voice. Sure, God had spoken to me before, but it had usually been in prayer or when I was reading the Bible. Sometimes, I had heard his voice more clearly, but often, the words came so quietly that it was difficult for me to discern them from my own thoughts.

Prayer is meant to be two-way communication; I knew that much. But speaking to him had always been easier for me than listening. Only this time, I couldn’t say anything. I stood there for a while and stepped away from the line.

In the lounge, I took a seat. I needed some time to sit down and think over our situation. It had seemed so logical for me and my wife Johanna to withdraw the tax return money deposited in my account. It wasn’t a

huge amount of money, maybe the equivalent of about 3,000 dollars in Finnish currency, but for my young family, it was a substantial amount of cash. Our vacation in Finland was almost over; in just a few days, we would travel back to Canada.

And after all, there was a lot of uncertainty and so many unanswered questions concerning our future.

Two years earlier, we had left our home country, Finland, to move to Sudbury, Northern Ontario, where I was elected the new pastor of the local Finnish Lutheran church.

It had been my dream to move to the United States when I was still a student. But Johanna made her point very clear. There was no way she was going to move abroad. Also, our first child was just born. End of discussion, we stayed in Finland.

Thus, instead of moving to North America, we shifted to the tiny village of Maaninka in the eastern part of Finland, where I started my new work as an assistant pastor. As it turned out, the local dialect of Finnish in that area was so distinctive that, in terms of language, it was almost like moving abroad anyway.

However, something quite unexpected happened the next fall. We were having a nice walk with our 18-month-old son sitting in his stroller. All of a sudden, Johanna said she was beginning to feel that she could

now move to Canada. Not to the States, but to Canada, yes. And somehow, by the end of our walk, this thought was turned into a deep conviction.

I started making inquiries about vacancies in Canada. Eventually, after several unlikely turns, the doors were opened. Our second son was born the following spring in the midst of travel arrangements. After I had served as a pastor for only a year and a half, Johanna and I and our two little children finally moved to the New World.

There was one slight problem. It seemed there was something in parish work or my role as a pastor that was difficult for me. I couldn't pinpoint it or put it into words.

Being kind, being nice, comes at a cost, and you don't know what that cost is until you have to pay the bill. You are simply too kind to realize that you are going too far in pleasing others. As a young pastor, I always strived to meet everyone's expectations, never saying no to anyone. I soon became very well-liked, but it was slowly becoming a real burden for me.

Surprisingly, the issue didn't just go away in the Fin-nair plane over the Atlantic. I was still such a nice young lad, and everyone else was so happy. After a couple of years in Canada, I was more than convinced that being a pastor was not my line of work.

At that time, I had several conversations with local

leaders about switching to an itinerant ministry. But those plans didn't work out, and I found myself left alone, pondering my future as a pastor. The conclusion was not an easy one, but it was the only choice I could come up with at that time. I decided to give up my work at St. Matthew's as soon as the congregation found a new pastor.

It was a big decision for our family. It would mean moving ahead to something quite new, relying on God's provision alone. Yet, somehow, we felt that living by faith was a part of our calling. We had three small children now. Our daughter had just been born.

But why would it matter how many kids we had? We prayed about it and sensed God assuring us to put our trust in Him. So, we decided quietly that we would not tell anyone but God about our needs.

However, in terms of practical arrangements, our plans were incomplete, to say the least. We had left for Finland for a month to visit our parents in Porvoo, a beautiful little town about a half-hour drive from Helsinki. Most of our stuff was still in the basement of the parsonage in Sudbury.

For our return to Canada, we had rented a postal box and booked a hotel room in a city called Barrie in Southern Ontario. We were not at all familiar with the city. We had only driven past it a few times over the past two years. That was about it. That was all we knew about our future.

If you take that money with you, I'll wait until you have spent it. Then I will show you that I can look after you.

I left the bank and returned to Johanna. After a thorough conversation, we came to the simple conclusion that the money would be wasted if we took it with us. It would be a lot more useful to pay back some of my student loans in advance. That is what we did, and on the last day of June, we flew back to Canada with much less money than before.

It all felt right and even somewhat thrilling when we landed at the Toronto International Airport. After about eight hours on the plane, we still had a one-hour cab ride to Barrie and the Venture Inn.

We had no clue just how appropriate the name of the hotel was.

Our Father

It has often been said that in his grace God has received us—accepted us—to be his children.

Such an expression refers to an adoption. But had God indeed adopted us, who would then be our real father?

It is true that in many Bible translations, the original Greek phrase *pneuma huiiothesias* has been translated as “spirit of adoption.” But *huiiothesia* does not mean adoption; it means “placing into the position of a son.” This is what we have lost, our position as a child.

While it is a fact that because of sin we have all strayed far away from God, he has not ceased to be the Father. There is still the echo of the Creator’s voice to be heard in all creation.

Or there might just be a nameless void within our hearts, in the absence of that voice.

Johanna shares: “One evening, I asked God to show me something that would help me to understand his love for people. The next morning I saw a picture.

There was a man standing outside the fence of a large school building. He was watching children running around the schoolyard. The kids were having a good time, laughing, and playing. One of the children noticed the man and took a good look at him for a moment. Then the child kept on playing. The rest of the kids did not pay any attention to the man at all.

Behind the fence, the man was still watching the children, looking sad. He was their father. They just didn't know it, and it hurt. It broke the father's heart.

I sensed the Holy Spirit speaking to me. Just as that man was the father of those children, so is God the real Father of every human. On the grounds of creation, we all belong to Him. He has created us to bear and somehow reflect his image.

And yet, most people live their lives not knowing God and his love.”

Jesus told us about two brothers (Luke 15:11-32). The firstborn was decent and good. He worked hard at the farm and was always obedient to his father. The younger son, however, was quite the opposite. He was defiant and demanded that his father give him his share of the inheritance right away. When the father complied, the younger son left his home and spent all of his possessions leading a worthless life.

Still, whether at home or far away, both of these

sons were offspring of the same father. And even though neither of them knew their father very well, that did not make them children of somebody else.

God is our true father. We've just had many foster parents in our lives. Society, school, culture, people around us, social media, television, and others have all participated in growing and fostering us. These foster parents have filled our minds with their values and measures, which happen to be very different from the ones that God has. We have learned to listen to the opinions and appraisals of our educators and to seek their acceptance.

And all that fostering has done the trick. When we've grown up, our home with the foster parents has begun to look more and more real. We have gradually become estranged from our childhood home, our first love. Finally, as adults, we can't recall anymore where we are from. We have been misled to think that the purpose of our life is to meet the demands of this world and to survive on our own.

But why do we still have this persistent, strange feeling that we are orphans?

Along with the influence of the foster parents, we are affected quite imperceptibly by the way we raise our children. Our goal, naturally, is to raise our youth so that they become independent and able to stand on their own. One day, they will move away from home,

maybe have a family of their own, and then bring up their kids to be independent and successful too.

This is obviously how it's supposed to work, and this is how we were raised. Eventually, children need to survive without their parents. The time will come when the parents will no longer be there.

Unfortunately, this model of parenting very often has a great impact on our concept of God.

This is how we think: God created the world and each of us, and in his generosity, he gave us everything he thought we might need. Then he just... left. Now, he resides somewhere behind the clouds, just sitting out there and watching quite passively how we get along with our lives down here.

We do not even dare to bother him too often. If we did, he might well become disappointed or unsatisfied with us, or merely tired of our pleadings. Assuming it is even possible to make real contact with such a distant God.

But this is not who God is. This is not what he is like. He is much closer to us than we think. He wants us to know him as our Father who strives to raise us *from adults to his little children*. He desires to bring us back to a close-knit relationship with him.

"He called a little child to him and placed the child among them. And he said, 'Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never

enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 18:2-4)

God wants us to grow all the more dependent on him. And less and less self-dependent. He wishes to keep us always close to him. He is not waiting for us to move away from home. Quite the contrary. The passion and desire of his heart is to look after his children. To look after you every day of your life.

This is—or at least it should be—good news, the true gospel, especially for us adults!

“So, he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’

So they began to celebrate.” (Luke 15:20-24)

Clouds in the Blue Sky

The sun was shining bright at 9:30 on Canada Day morning, the first of July. It was 25 degrees Celsius already, or 77 degrees Fahrenheit. Another beautiful summer day in Ontario. From the Scandinavian point of view, Southern Ontario is located quite south, about the same latitude as the Mediterranean shores of Southern France. Yet nature bears a great resemblance to Finland, with all those lakes and forests, especially when you travel a bit further north. No wonder so many Finnish immigrants have found their way to the Northern United States and Canada. Getting used to the new country has not been too difficult.

We did not know Barrie, but our first impression was very positive. The city looked clean, attractive, and child-friendly. Our hotel was located on Bayfield Street in a vibrant commercial area, full of malls and restaurants. We were told that Bayfield Street had once been mentioned in the *Guinness World Records* because of its numerous fast food outlets. There would be no shortage of lunch options.

We strolled past Kentucky Fried Chicken and Taco Bell and found a small colorful playground for the kids. Our sons, four years and two years old, sprinted out to play with the various equipment. Our daughter, four months of age, was taking a nap in the baby buggy. She wasn't interested in the slide yet. We watched the boys play and smiled.

That's when it struck me. A sudden realization of the insanity of our situation took over. Fear gripped my heart.

We had three kids and very little money. We were strangers in a foreign city, in the midst of people we didn't know. Furthermore, we lived in a small hotel room, a family of five, and had no home. I had given up my work and reached for some sort of dream of a new ministry. Now, our whole life depended on this wild idea of God promising to be our employer. Moreover, we had made an agreement not to tell anyone about our needs.

I felt fear beginning to strangle my throat. My breath turned thin and shallow. It was just as if my breast was collapsing. What have I done? What are we doing here? What are we supposed to do now?

The next days went by in a haze. The ever-present, bottomless anxiety wouldn't let loose for a moment. The worst part of it was that there seemed to be nothing we could do about it. Nothing I could do, that is.

Johanna seemed to have her hands full with our three little ones.

A friend of ours had brought us our minivan from Sudbury, but we weren't even able to think about leaving. We just stayed in the hotel and watched our funds decrease day after day.

Come to think of it, we were not lacking anything. The hotel was neat and clean, with a continental breakfast included. The daily meal was available nearby, with tons of options. There was even a hot tub in the hotel where I tried to massage my sore back.

I had had back problems for a long time. Earlier in the spring, I'd had to crawl from the bathroom to the living room a couple of times because I wasn't able to walk. I never went to see the doctor. I was a Finn, after all. My back was just a little weak, nothing more. But now, I just didn't know how to get up in the morning so that the pain would not grow worse.

Nearby the hotel, we found a beautiful arboretum. During those days, it became like the New Testament garden of Gethsemane to us, the place where Jesus had poured out the anxiety of his heart to the Father. The serene beauty of nature made it at least a bit easier for us to lift our eyes off our pain.

For some reason, in this agony, the words of Psalm 23 came to my mind over and over again, but in a twisted form: the "green pastures" were turned into "wretched pastures" by changing just one letter in the

Finnish translation. Why did you forsake us, God, and leave our family alone with my stupidity and the wrong choices I had made?

After two weeks of distress, the fear subsided, surprisingly, and gave way to peace and trust. Maybe this was the peace that surpasses all understanding, as Jesus said. Because there was still no change in conditions whatsoever. We were just beginning to anticipate that the reason for us being there was ultimately that God wanted to teach us something about his power and love.

In fact, we started to wait for the day we would run out of money and depend on him alone. I was reminded of this other Bible passage. *“Do not I fill heaven and earth?” declares the Lord. (Jeremiah 23:24)*

Surely, God was able to see us through. He was well aware of our situation, even though we lived in a distant, foreign country.

The next two weeks were very different. The anxiety was gone, even if we still didn't know anything about the future. Nevertheless, every time I needed to go to the bank to make a withdrawal, seeing the balance of the account shrinking caused a peculiar feeling in my gut. It is quite strange that an external thing like money can have such an impact on our inner being. It might just be true that, in the end, our life depends on what we trust.

It was Wednesday, the 28th of July. We had stayed in the hotel for almost a month. Our wait would soon be over. We knew we couldn't go on like this for much longer.

The phone rang in our hotel room. I picked up the phone, somewhat surprised. Not many people knew we were staying in that hotel. It was a Finnish lady who lived in a house in Toronto with her husband. We had met the couple some time ago in Sudbury. The lady sounded very excited. Somebody had told her about us being in that hotel in Barrie, and she had decided to give us a call.

“Why are you living in that hotel? Come and stay with us. We are just about to leave for our cottage for a month. You can stay in our house for free!”

The offer was surprising—and terrific, to be honest, given our situation. However, I told her I'd like to talk about it with Johanna, and the lady agreed to phone me again in the evening.

“You can leave the hotel tomorrow morning,” she said, finishing the call.

Johanna and I discussed the matter and prayed about it. We both sensed God speaking to us, not in an audible voice but through an inner conviction: “No, do not leave. Stay in the hotel.”

The warm-hearted lady from Toronto called us again in the evening. She sounded a bit offended because we

did not accept her offer. I could not give her a good explanation as to why we were turning down her suggestion. We just felt that we should stay in the hotel. So the next morning we stayed in Barrie.

It was one of the most important and far-reaching decisions we have ever made.

Unity

In the first chapters of the Bible, there is a description of the communion of God and man, of the unity that sin had not yet broken. However, the tragic fall of Adam and Eve changed everything. Sin came between man and God, and man was torn apart from the original purpose of his being.

God wanted to restore his communion with man. He pursued it through the Old Testament, which tells us about God's covenant with the people of Israel. Still, it was not until the New Covenant that God made through his Son Jesus that brought reconciliation and communion within the reach of every man again.

God's plan was that his only Son was to be born in this world as a man. He was to become the second or the last Adam who would accomplish what the first Adam had not. He would lead a pure, sinless life in perfect communion with God, and then—voluntarily and without his own cause—take up the punishment of the first Adam. Jesus would give his life for every man; the innocent would bear the sentence of the guilty one.

Thus, the true humanity of the Son of God was essential for the sake of the atonement. But it was crucial also because Jesus came to demonstrate to us what kind of relationship with God we should all have.

The unity, the communion of Jesus with his Father, reflects the communion of man and God in its purest form, in the Holy Spirit. In the relationship between the Son and the Father, we can see the model of perfect dependence and child-likeness. This is something God is calling us all into.

But for us to enter this relationship—to become repositioned as children of God—we must deeply and profoundly participate in the communion of Jesus.

When Jesus knew he was soon to be leaving his disciples, he prayed a specific prayer for them:

“I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one.” (John 17:11)

This High Priestly Prayer of Jesus is quite often misinterpreted as a request for unity between Christians. We are then encouraged to nourish our mutual understanding in the Spirit, or maybe even strive for ecumenical unity between churches, so that this essential prayer of Jesus would finally be answered.

Just as if the ultimate purpose of the Son of God

being born as a man and dying on the cross was uniting people with one another!

Unity among Christians is a precious gift that is always worth seeking in every situation. But it is not something Jesus needed specifically to pray for. He had already given his disciples a very good guideline for obtaining it. “My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you,” he said to his followers. (John 15:12)

What was it then that Jesus prayed for? What was so crucial for the mission of Jesus that he needed to turn to the Father for it before he left?

“My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” (John 17:20-21)

As the High Priest of the New Covenant, Jesus prayed that every Christian would have *the same communion with the Father that he had*, through Jesus himself. This was the ultimate goal of God’s plan of salvation, the restoration of the once-broken relationship between God and man. Jesus was asking the Father that this purpose would now be fulfilled.

“I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so

that they may be brought to complete unity.”

(John 17:22-23)

And the Father answered his Son's prayer. The relationship destroyed by sin was recreated through atonement in Christ. As we believe in Jesus and confess our faith in him, the Holy Spirit brings us into a relationship with God.

This fundamental relationship then becomes the basis for the unity among Christians, too. Christian love is a fruit of the Spirit, the offspring of our close communion with Christ.

It is just like what the German Lutheran nun, Mother Basilea Schlink, once said, “The closer we are to Jesus, the closer we are to one another.”

Healed

Thursday morning was just as sunny and bright as the mornings before. The continental breakfast at the hotel offered no surprises either: coffee, croissants, marmalade, and cereal. The other routines were pretty much the same as well: Wash the kids, change the diapers, put clean clothes on, change the diapers again. Then out for a walk in the fresh air and some lunch later on.

So, we had not moved to Toronto that morning. Staying in Barrie still felt the right thing to do, albeit not easier. I guess we were waiting for something. We just had no idea what it could be.

There was a three-day seminar on healing beginning that night at the local Vineyard Church. I had been somewhat interested in the theme ever since my studies, so I decided to attend at least the first session of the seminar. Johanna figured she could have a nice and peaceful evening with our three lively kids instead.

The seminar was to be held at the large gym of Timothy Christian School, close by. The visiting speaker, with a nice southern accent, was from Texas. I had never heard of him, although his name sounded very familiar for some reason: Billy Smith. You could hardly think of a more common name.

The speaker started sharing his story and teaching about prayer in a refreshingly natural way. There was no shouting or jumping, nothing that would distract the audience. I was slightly relieved. To me, he sounded almost like a Finn.

Billy Smith told us about his difficult past in the home of an abusive, alcoholic father, and all the sicknesses he had had in his youth. By his mid-to-late twenties, he had gone through many sicknesses and several operations. Both his feet had been operated on, as well as both knees. Billy also had two back operations and three heart attacks. As a young man, he was experiencing three to four epileptic seizures per day. In 1981, Billy was in an auto accident, in which his head was partially crushed. The doctors told his wife, Mary, that he would not live through the night.

Now that he was standing there completely healed, it was not difficult to believe in God's power and love. But instead of founding his teaching on his own experiences, it was obvious that Billy Smith wanted our faith to be anchored in the unchanging Word of God.

About an hour later, Billy finished the teaching with a straightforward request.

“I’ve been speaking for quite some time now, and we could take a look at how these things work in practice. If there are any sick people present, you could come up here. Those with back problems come first.”

I started moving my back on my seat. No, it feels a little bit better today than yesterday, I thought. I don’t think I’m going there. I looked at Billy sitting in a chair with an open Coca-Cola bottle beside him on the floor. He was measuring people’s legs.

Besides, I didn’t even have that leg problem anymore, not since I was prayed over at the confirmation camp.

I had been assigned to the Alppila Lutheran Church in Helsinki in 1987 to do my summer training as part of my theological studies. Pretty soon, I noticed that the job description of the local youth pastor, Seppo Juntunen, was somewhat exceptional. Every time Pastor Juntunen was at the church office, a few people were waiting for him outside his room. There was always someone coming in or going out, and after a while, the receptionist and I didn’t pay much attention to it anymore.

One day, Seppo came to us and asked if the client who just left had looked happy. We had to admit that we didn’t notice him at all.

With a boyish grin, Seppo said that a Christian doctor had advised this man to come to see him. The guy's leg had been about an inch and a half shorter than the other one. After a simple prayer at the church office, this man went to see his doctor again.

Stories like that did not make much sense to me until later that summer. I was helping Seppo lead a confirmation camp when he happened to ask about my legs. No, they had never been measured, and yes, I had back problems from time to time. More specifically, long walks and extended standing caused aching. Especially at ladies' clothing stores with Johanna.

Seppo asked me to sit down and pointed out that my left leg seemed to be almost an inch shorter than my right one. That did not surprise me. But it was weird to see your leg growing that missing inch in a few seconds. It was just a little prayer, and yet, as a result, I was able to stand quite upright. And my back was better too.

I ended up staying in Alppila in the youth work for almost two years, along with my studies. I even traveled with pastor Juntunen's ministry team with Johanna for some time. It was wonderful to see God touching and healing the sick and needy.

What kind of work would be more valuable than this?

I was watching Billy Smith as the line of people moved slowly ahead in the gym. Many of the people returning to their seats had wide smiles on their faces. Well, to be honest...my back is hurting quite a bit even now, I thought. Maybe I should go.

I was among the last asking for prayer. Billy had me take the seat and started checking my legs. I said my legs had been prayed for years ago in Finland. Still holding my ankles, Billy lifted his eyes.

“Your legs are just fine, but you need two new discs in your spine, one down there and one in the middle.”

I said absolutely nothing. Billy asked me to stand up and placed his hand on my lower back. With a perfectly normal tone, he commanded the discs to be formed. I staggered forward a couple of steps as I felt my ribs moving within me.

“How do you feel?” Billy asked. I was so dumb-founded I couldn't say anything. I bent my back.

“I think it's still a bit stiff there,” I said, pointing to one spot in my hip. Billy gave me a stern glance and said a brief prayer.

“Now it feels quite good,” I blurted out. All the pain was gone.

As I was driving back to the hotel, I could not help but think what would have happened had we accepted the offer and moved to Toronto. Or what would not have happened.

It was a bit funny, though, that the next evening this genuine Texas preacher referred to me as an example of a person who doesn't have the wits to be grateful to God. Apparently, as I had not lifted my hands in joy, I had not behaved like an average American.

But the truth is, I was very happy—and most thankful to God.

Father's Son

Jesus had learned a lot from his foster father, Joseph. He was quite skilled in working with timber and other construction materials. For sure, he would have become an excellent carpenter had he followed Joseph's footsteps. And wasn't that exactly what everyone was expecting of him?

However, he had a very different calling. "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" he had asked his parents years ago. Jesus knew already in his youth who his true Father was. So, instead of dedicating his life to the career of a carpenter, he devoted himself to his real vocation by watching and listening to the work of his real Father. That mission unfolded then according to the Old Testament prophecy:

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

(Luke 4:18-19, Isaiah 61:1-2)

Jesus was fully dependent on his Father. He knew that he would not be able to fulfill his mission without his help, not without the power of the Holy Spirit. He needed to listen to the Father and follow his lead all along, to keep watching what the Father was doing.

For even though he was the Son of God, he had not come to this world as God. He was born a man in an ordinary home and family. In the incarnation, the Son, who had been with the Father since the beginning of all time, gave up his position, emptied himself, and was found in the appearance of a man. (see Phil 2:5-8)

Had Jesus lived on this Earth equipped with all the qualities, abilities, and authority of God, he would not have been able to call his disciples to enter the same kind of life. Had he performed the miracles and wonders through his divinity, he could not have promised his followers that they would be doing the same works he was doing, and even greater things.

But now, Jesus could call his disciples to work too. He would teach them to do the works of the Father and to listen to his voice. The disciples would see for themselves how close the Kingdom of God had come. The sick would be healed through them as well, and the poor would hear the Good News. And when the time would come for him to leave, the work of the Kingdom would continue and spread over the whole world in the power of the Holy Spirit. The disciples would just

need to stay in touch with him, even when he was gone.

“Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.” (John 15:4-5)

This is why Jesus came to the world, so that this communion would be established. That was the reason why he would need to give his life. It was the perfect plan of the loving Father for every human. Jesus shared the same love the Father had, for he was one with his Father.

Like Father, like Son.

The Step Out

Saturday morning, the 31st of July. I am sitting in our hotel room, trying to withhold my tears. We have no more money; now we must leave the hotel. This is the day we have been waiting for. I just had no idea it would be so difficult... This room is the only home we have.

Johanna seemed to take it much better. She was collecting our stuff and taking a few photos of the room. Then she said, “Now we would really need to do some laundry.”

“Well, that’s true,” I admitted, looking at our three little laundry machines. We still had some change so that we could have the clothes washed. That took care of our last coins.

We had some snacks in the cooler, and we decided to go out for lunch. That is what we did, literally. We had lunch on the lawn in front of the Christian School. The sun was shining and the boys were having fun, running around and making stops just to bite a sandwich. Our daughter had a lunch of her own. This is the

difference between a child and an adult, I thought. A child cries when hungry, but an adult often weeps just from the fear of hunger. We knew that after that lunch, there would be no food left.

It was the last day of the prayer seminar, and we decided to go inside for the afternoon teaching session. Not that we were able to listen. We were just sitting in the back of the crowded gym, trying not to think about the dead-end situation we were stuck in.

I had thought that I would be able to maintain my trust and faith in God's promises, more or less. But you couldn't imagine this. This was real life, not a practice. If Christianity were eventually all about devout feelings and hopes, if God weren't real, we would soon be crushed.

The afternoon session was about to end. People started getting out of their seats. I turned to Johanna and said: "I guess we should go somewhere too."

But where? I couldn't even think far enough. We started quietly packing our stuff. Then we realized the guest speaker had left the stage. He was pushing his way through the crowd. For some reason, he was approaching me and Johanna. He made it through and started talking with us.

After a brief discussion, Billy Smith grabbed a chair, as if he were in no hurry whatsoever. We were quite

puzzled; he didn't exactly act like an average busy preacher. Why had he come to us in the first place?

As we had agreed, we did not tell him anything about our situation. We just shared something about our family and our background.

Suddenly, Billy asked, "By the way, have you had dinner already?"

I made a quick glance at Johanna. "No, we haven't had dinner yet."

"You guys like pizza?"

"Well, sure, we like pizza," I replied honestly.

"Great, let's go to have a pizza!"

A storm of arguments rose in my mind, but too late. Billy was already hurrying towards the exit, accompanied by a young lad, a relative from the States who had volunteered to be his driver on the trip. We had no money and we couldn't tell him that!

We followed Billy's car and parked at a Pizza Hut close by. Billy was placing the order when we got in. We settled upon two gigantic pizzas with a memorable name: Meat Lover's. The recipe was quite simple: lots of meat, tomato sauce, and cheese. It was super greasy and tasted gorgeous. Right then, it was hands down the best pizza of our lives.

We picked a table in the back of the pizzeria and had a relaxed conversation over dinner. Billy started telling

how God had called him to be an evangelist and how he had been leaving for his first trip to Eastern Europe. On the plane, he was still arguing with God.

“I can’t go. There is no way I can be like those great preachers.”

God had answered him curtly. “If you try to be somebody else, I will not be able to use you.”

So, Billy started his ministry far away from his own country. His first experiences were quite extraordinary.

He was staying in a hotel after a meeting. Early, very early in the morning, there was a knock on the door. Billy woke up and opened the door, feeling somewhat dazed.

There was a hotel cleaner with a group of people standing in a row in the corridor. Billy could only watch as the cleaner tried to explain something to him in a foreign language. All of a sudden, Billy noticed there was a dark spot that moved along the body of the first person standing. The dot stopped on his knee. Still a bit drowsy, Billy pointed at the knee. The man nodded vigorously. Apparently, he was supposed to pray for the knee. That’s what he did, and the man looked very happy. The dot moved on and stopped at every person on a different body part. Eventually, the quiet prayer meeting came to an end, and Billy was able to go back to bed.

The next morning, there was a knock on the door again. The hotel cleaner was back with a smile and with a new group of people standing behind her!

Billy Smith shared his story with us for quite some time while we were enjoying our pizzas. Suddenly, he looked at Johanna and asked abruptly:

“Have you told me anything? Have you said to me that you need something?”

Johanna looked a tad frightened and couldn't reply. Billy was quiet for a moment. Then he continued with a soft voice:

“I just wanted to make it very clear that you haven't told me anything. But when we were chatting at the Christian School after the teaching session, the Holy Spirit said to me, ‘Take these people out for a dinner.’”

After that, Billy Smith opened his wallet, took out a bundle of notes, and gave the money to Johanna.

“I don't ever do this if God doesn't specifically tell me to do so. But he said to me, ‘Give them some money.’”

As we left the pizzeria, we were exhausted. It was as if we had had a long day of work. Most probably, we had never been so scared before in our lives. We had tried to hang on to the promises we believed God had given us. But we had seen how hard it was for us to trust him.

Yet he had been faithful. We were amazed and full of joy at what God had done. Surely he would be able to take care of our family in the days to come, too.

The Call

“Shortly before dawn, Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. ‘It’s a ghost,’ they said, and cried out in fear.

But Jesus immediately said to them: ‘Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.’

‘Lord, if it’s you,’ Peter replied, ‘tell me to come to you on the water.’

‘Come,’ he said.

Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, ‘Lord, save me!’

Immediately, Jesus reached out his hand and caught him.

‘You of little faith,’ he said, ‘why did you doubt?’ And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, ‘Truly you are the Son of God.’” (Matthew 14:25-33)

This reckless adventure of Peter has fascinated Bible readers throughout history. The paragraph teaches us about faith and unbelief. It tells us about Peter's child-like trust as he thirsts to follow the example of Jesus.

On the other hand, it reminds us of the fear that easily grips our hearts when the conditions around us turn difficult.

Jesus had sent his disciples across the lake by boat. He had retreated to a mountain to pray. Very early in the morning, he approached the boat, walking on the lake. The disciples started screaming—some grown-ups. Coming closer, Jesus calmed them with his voice of the Good Shepherd.

Peter's reply is astonishing: "Lord, if it's you, tell me to come to you on the water."

Frankly, walking on the water is not humanly possible. In the language of physics, you could say that the surface tension of water would never be strong enough to carry Peter—or Jesus, for that matter. We don't need to be scientists or fishermen to understand this.

But Jesus just walked. Peter could not resist the temptation. The impossible was quickly becoming an everyday reality to the disciples. Barely a day before, they had witnessed a huge miracle, the feeding of five thousand with just five loaves of bread and two fish. They had been with Jesus, delivering the food. They had been part of the miracle.

Peter's childlike desire to follow Jesus boldly conquered all the rational considerations. Faith was born in Peter's heart. Like a magnet, it drew him overboard, onto the waves.

But there is something we need to understand about faith. We cannot create faith or give birth to it on our own. Even the Apostle Peter was not able to step out of the boat on his own will.

This is why he had to say to Jesus, "Tell me to come to you on the water."

Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of Christ. (Romans 10:17) Trust is born as a response to his call. It is only when we hear God himself calling us to come that we receive the courage to rely on him. Without his touch, we are bound to this world and our constraints.

Later on, Peter probably wished he had been braver. If only he could have held on to his faith a bit longer. It wasn't that elegant to plunge into the water in front of the others. But then again, maybe it was worth it. At least for a moment, he got to be right there where Jesus was.

*Lord, teach me to live
in the reality of your Kingdom.
Help me to hear your voice.
Touch me so I can trust you.*

Father Knows

Another sunny day was quickly turning into a warm and beautiful night. We had stayed in the same hotel for a few more days before we had to leave again. Then we received a wire money transfer and went back to the hotel. Now we were out again.

By this time, I thought I had figured out the pattern of how God worked: First, we lived in the hotel until we ran out of money, and we had to leave. Then we receive more funds from somewhere to return to the hotel. Now, there was something wrong.

I glanced at the child choir in the back seat. The impatient singers were tuning their voices already; we needed to do something right now. But we had no place to go. What options did we have? Should we spend the night outdoors or what?

We knew we had to take the kids to the bathroom, so we headed first to Burger King. On our way there, I let my frustration burst out:

“Can’t you see we are here all alone? Have you forgotten us?”

We managed to wash the kids, and we had some evening snacks in the cooler. I couldn't think of any other place for our minivan than the parking lot of the familiar Venture Inn. I drove to the back of the hotel and carefully picked the spot that was farthest from the building. I didn't want anyone to take notice that we were planning to stay out there for the night.

The minivan wasn't very big, but we knew we could make pretty good sleeping arrangements for the kids and that we would be alright too. So, I lifted some of our stuff out of the vehicle to make more room inside. I was glad it was dark already.

Our little boys were zigzagging around the van. It was a warm night, and they seemed to think this new accommodation was a terrific idea. In the morning, they would be outside just by opening the door. However, I could not help but watch the hotel windows.

"Hey Dad, can't you see we are on the wrong side of those windows," I said under my breath with a bitter tone. "Shouldn't we be there in the hotel, not out here in the open?"

Johanna was inside the van preparing the beds. Suddenly, I heard her voice calling: "Oh yes. We would really need some water for the night."

Well, of course! Just what I needed. I looked at all the items I had spread around. Where would I be able to get water now? Before my category-two comment

storm surged, I realized a young man was approaching us with a little girl. He came closer and presented the one question I did not want to hear:

“Hi there. Are you guys planning to stay here overnight?”

That was exactly the kind of attention I had tried to avoid! I was ashamed of us having to sleep in the van. I strived to sound just right when I answered him.

“Oh yes, we thought we would stay here tonight.”

My purpose was to make it clear that we could obviously go to the hotel as well, but sometimes we just like to sleep in the minivan for a change.

Apparently, he understood it right as he continued, “Okay, that’s great. I just thought you were coming to the hotel as you were moving your stuff around. But if you are going to be staying out here, is there anything you need? For instance, I could bring you some water.”

For a moment, I just stood there.

“Thank you, water would be just great.”

The guy left for the hotel. After a while, he got back with a large can of cold water and ice. I had a brief chat with the young man in the parking lot. He told me he was from the States, visiting Canada for the first time with his family. When I thanked him once more, he replied with a wide grin: “My family and I are Christians. God bless you!”

I watched the young man as he walked away. I

thought I was beginning to understand something simple but quite important. Maybe the things I consider necessary and the things I truly need aren't always the same.

Thank you, Lord, for seeing us and knowing us so well!
Thank you for knowing what we really need.

Jars of Clay

It is a wonderful blessing that God himself wants to parent us. He loves us so much that he wants us to know him better. And just like any loving father, he also wishes to see our character mature.

This process requires us to humbly admit our incompleteness. Then again, this is nothing more than being honest with yourself and acknowledging the facts: God is great, and we are not. He is our wise Father, and we are his not-that-wise children. Sometimes we may just forget the basics and start to think we have somehow become complete already.

As if we had learned everything there is to learn.

Apostle Paul had been in God's school for a long time. Despite that, or maybe just because of that, he was fully aware of his shortcomings. Perhaps he had perceived his limitations at an early age, on the road to Damascus.

"We have this treasure in jars of clay," he writes to the Corinthians. (2 Cor 4:7) We are but humans. As

long as we live in this world, we see and comprehend the Kingdom of God like a reflection, as in a mirror. That is why Paul states that, in the end, all of our knowledge is partial and incomplete. And the same deficiency marks our experience of the Holy Spirit and his work.

Understanding our incompleteness is helpful to us in at least three ways:

1. It sets us free from our inner compulsion to be perfect. We are still on the way, learning something new throughout our lives. Even as Christians, we remain disciples and trainees, and we will not become ready in this age.

2. It helps us to relate to others, too. We do not need to label as a false prophet or a false teacher a Christian who is wrong about something. We may point out that he or she is wrong about this particular matter, for now, because he hasn't understood it right yet. He is still on the way and learning more, just as we are. When we realize that none of us humans is 100 percent right, we can show mercy to others.

3. It reminds us of the importance of evaluating all teaching. Sometimes, when we categorize a person as "a right and true teacher," we thus deem all of his teaching perfect and flawless. Just as if it would make

it easier for us to have complete trust in at least a few teachers, and to believe all of their words. Even though we should weigh every teaching and keep only that which is good.

However, as we evaluate the teachings, it is advisable to bear in mind that our comprehension is limited too. Others may be right, even if we have a different view. Every teacher, being fully aware of his incompleteness, should also bring forth his teaching in humility. Then there would always be room for loving evaluation.

There was only one who heard and fully received the will of the Father, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. He has called us to study and learn, and to work together as his imperfect disciples.

“But knowledge puffs up while love builds up. Those who think they know something do not yet know as they ought to know. But whoever loves God is known by God.”

(1 Cor 8:1-3)

Tank on Empty

Frowning, I rubbed my temples. If living by faith was supposed to feel great, I guess I just couldn't handle it. I did not know how we had managed this far.

But then again, we hadn't lacked anything, and we'd had a proper dinner every day. The days began to mix up. For a week, we hadn't had more than 57 cents in Canadian currency. It was so small a sum that you couldn't really buy anything with it. Not even a liter of gasoline. The low-fuel warning light on the dashboard of our minivan had been on for a few days already. It was just a matter of time until we would run out of gas. We had to use our van every day, and I knew it was by far the thirstiest vehicle I had ever had.

The worst thing for me was being unable to make any plans for the future; that was something I had always been eager to do. Now it seemed our life was not in the least in our own hands anymore.

The last time we returned to the hotel, we heard a hotel cleaner shout to one another: "Hey, they are back again!"

This was beginning to look stupid, and to feel that way, too.

At the Sunday service, I dropped our last coins into the offering. Not that I felt devoted or good about that at all. After the service, I went to the street and picked up a newspaper with all kinds of job opportunities.

We had a large mobile phone bill coming due in a few days, and we had no money. Should I look for a new employer, someone who remembers to pay the salary on time? The paper was lying on the floor of the van between the front seats. For some reason, I just couldn't open it yet.

Water drops were running down the windshield. I think it was our third night in the van. We had been invited for breakfast the next morning by the local Full Gospel Businessmen. Just about the right time, I thought. Even though it was a little difficult for me to imagine how wearing shorts and with three little kids, we would blend in among Christian businessmen.

The breakfast was abundant and delicious, with sausages and all. The businessmen had their meeting and, after that, the man who had invited us for breakfast asked if we would come over for a visit. We would even be welcome to stay for a few days since his children were not home and there would be plenty of room.

Well, we didn't have any other plans. The only problem was that they lived about 15 miles away from the downtown and our postal box. We wanted to check the mail daily, even though there was seldom anything in the box. And besides that, we didn't want to socialize with new people right then. However, despite our hesitation, we felt grateful and gladly accepted the invitation.

On the third day, I'd had enough. We had driven to the town center and checked our empty mailbox once again. The low-fuel light was continually on. What does this van run on, really?

What is more, we had an invoice of more than \$200 with the next day's due date. This whole thing didn't make any sense at all!

I was driving back to our friends' home, Johanna sitting beside me, and the kids on the rear bench. I was immensely thankful to Johanna, who had been able to take care of the everyday routines of the family, no matter what happened. But now, I was totally fed up.

A hundred meters before the house, I kicked the brake pedal down. "I can't take this anymore! There is no way I'm going back there! Now I'm going to find a new job. A proper job!"

I was blowing off steam and turned the minivan around. With the low-fuel light beaming, I drove back to downtown Barrie. We sat on a bench at Bayfield

Mall for quite some time pondering our options. Eventually, we couldn't do anything but get back to the van and start driving. On our way back, it finally happened, at last. I gave up everything. I said to God, "This is not my life anymore. This is your life, I give it wholly to you."

I can't describe the change that took place in me. Suddenly, all the anxiety was gone. All the fear of the present and the future had disappeared. There was no urge to make plans, no job opportunities to consider. Even the fuel light did not bother me anymore.

We had a wonderful, joyous last evening with our friends at their home. The next morning, we said goodbye and headed back to Barrie.

We stopped by the postal office. With a perfectly calm and peaceful heart, I walked in. I opened the box and took out two envelopes. They should not have arrived on the same day because the stamps showed that they had been mailed on different dates.

In addition to loving greetings from our friends, there was quite a bit of money in those two envelopes, three hundred Canadian dollars altogether. That was enough for the invoice and a few necessities. There would even be some money left for gas.

I couldn't keep from smiling when the low-fuel light finally went out.

Freedom

As humans, it is natural for us to hold on to what is our own. Our grip is usually tighter, the more valuable or important the thing is. And the tighter our grip is, the harder it is for us to let go.

One day, Jesus was teaching his disciples about denying oneself and losing one's life:

“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.” (Matthew 16:24-25)

The words of Jesus carried a quite literal meaning for many of the listeners. The death of Jesus on the cross was soon followed by persecution. Several of his disciples followed him to the end. Still, losing your life means something else, too.

The idea of giving your life to God has always been a part of the Gospel. Are we willing to give everything into his hands, or would we rather stay in control of our own lives? In this day and age, we are taught that

our life belongs to no one but us. Nobody has the right to interfere with it. Our life is our own. We answer for it to nobody but ourselves. No wonder the Bible's teaching sounds so strange. If God has created us, then our life is a gift from him. And if he has redeemed us through the blood of his own Son, isn't Apostle Paul right when he writes that "you are not your own; you were bought at a price?" (1 Cor 6:19-20)

But if we think God has redeemed us to be his slaves, we have misunderstood his motives. He is our real Father who has given us our life, our freedom, and everything we have. Why would he now want to deprive us of it? We have gone so far from him that we don't know him anymore. In reality, he just wishes us to return to him. He yearns to give us a life full of meaning and purpose.

The tricky part is that we can receive the new only after we have given up the old. Sometimes, that can prove to be hard. Really hard. You see, that means we are no longer in control. Can we trust God to take hold of that which we are giving up and letting go? And what is he going to do if we give him carte blanche?

The truth is, nothing sets us free like giving our lives into God's hands. When we loosen our grip on the burdens of the past as well as the worries of the future, we are released to live in the present in a new way. A bit like little children.

Daily Bread

I paid the bill and walked out of the bank. They had built these large shopping malls all over Canada. I was told there had been a competition in Thunder Bay to find a good name for the new mall. Somebody had come up with a clever suggestion: “Keskus.” In the ears of many, the new name undoubtedly sounded very exotic. In Finnish, it meant quite simply, “the center.” There were still thousands of Finnish immigrants in Ontario.

Johanna had stayed in the mall with the kids. As I walked closer, I saw her talking to a lady whom we had met earlier at the church. In the middle of the conversation, the lady asked, “By the way, just occurred to me, would you have anything planned for tonight? It would be great to have you over for dinner.”

Johanna glanced at me. I guess we didn’t have anything special for tonight. “Sure, we would love to,” she replied.

The evening came, and we went for a visit. We sat down around the table, all nine of us. After the

blessing, we started talking and having a good time over dinner. We felt very welcome, but at the same time, we couldn't help but notice that the meal was quite plain and there wasn't very much of it on the plates.

After the dinner, the mother of this friendly family said to us, "To be honest, had I had time to consider when I met you in the mall, I would not have invited you over tonight. Our budget is a little tight right now, and we are just leaving for a trip tomorrow. But those words just came out of my mouth."

Her confession bothered us to some extent. We did not want to be a burden to anyone. Yet it seemed that our hosts truly wanted to share with us what they had. Later in the evening, they came up with a surprising suggestion.

"We were just wondering, would it be possible for you to stay here at our home for a few days? We are taking our kids to a camp in Northern Ontario, and we would not like to leave our home without supervision. We will be gone for three days, and you could stay here that long."

The offer was tempting, especially because it would give us a rare chance to be together as a family, without others. "That would be great, if you think you would like that," we answered with a smile.

"That's awesome! Feel free to take anything to eat from the cupboards. Make yourselves at home!"

In the morning, our friends almost didn't make it off the front yard. Their old car broke down, and it wasn't until a couple of hours later that they finally managed to leave. We stood at the front door and waved as they drove away.

Later on, Johanna went to the kitchen and started opening the cupboards.

"Markku, come and take a look. I don't know how to make dinner. There is so little of everything that whatever you take, that's the end of it."

We sat there for a while, wondering. We had understood and accepted that this peculiar period of our life was meant to teach us something about God's care for us. What we didn't understand, however, was why God would lead us to people who had so little, barely enough for themselves. Didn't he have any wealthier disciples?

Eventually, Johanna was able to make us a decent dinner. And in any case, we were happy to rest here for a couple of days.

The following day, we came across a Dutch fellow who had seen us at the church a while ago. According to him, God had spoken to him early in the spring about sharing his home with others. And when he saw us for the first time, he felt we should be staying at his house.

So he invited us to move over to his place the same evening. We agreed to come the next day since we felt

we still wanted to spend this one more night on our own.

The next day, Johanna found it quite difficult to prepare lunch. The groceries were running out. Frankly, I thought the meal was primitive. When we left in the afternoon, it was the first time during the past weeks that I felt I had not had a proper meal.

A moment later, we arrived at the Dutchman's home. His first words were, "You guys like pizza?"

We were quite amused. God has a good sense of humor. We drove to Pizza Hut in no time, just like we had done a couple of weeks ago with Billy Smith.

The Dutchman lived with his 12-year-old son. He was delighted with the thought that we could bring a breeze of ordinary family life into their home. He made a proposition:

"What if you, Johanna, made dinner for all of us daily, and I would pay for the groceries? I go out for dinner with my son all the time, and it would be nice to have some homemade food for a change. If you make a shopping list to cover the next two weeks, I can go to a grocery store with Markku."

He continued, "The basement is all yours, and you can use the washing machine down there. And you can stay with us as long as you want."

It sounded incredible to us. Johanna started planning the shopping list, which turned out to be quite

long. Virtually everything needed to be purchased, including flour and other basic kitchen stuff. The total was several large bags of groceries. The next day, the Dutchman wanted to confess. "Well, the truth is I don't have that much money..."

"Oh God," I thought.

"...as I only have this part-time job at the warehouse of a grocery store, and I'm studying computer programming too."

Why, just why are you doing this? Why do you make us a burden for your poor children?

"But something strange happened today. Along with other mail, there was a letter from the government. There was a check that covered all the groceries we had to buy yesterday. I don't understand it. I never receive any checks from the government."

In two weeks, we had to make the next large purchase. After that, the guy came to me, perplexed.

"Another check from the government..."

Then, one day, someone called and tried to reach the Dutchman. I answered the phone and promised to let him know about the call. A few hours later, he came home and called back. Then he changed clothes and left without saying a word. He returned in the evening and told us what had happened. The phone call had been from a bank that offered him a full-time job with computers. He received the job the same night.

We were beginning to understand. God was serious when he assured us that he would look after those, too, who shared their home with us.

It had been a week since we left the previous family, the one with the broken car, when we again saw the lady who had invited us over for dinner. They had barely managed to make their trip to Northern Ontario and back. She came to us with her eyes sparkling.

“You don’t know what has happened! When we got back from the children’s camp, there was a message on the answering machine. We were offered a much better car for a good price. And we received a call from our bank. There was some re-arranging of the mortgage, and suddenly we had money to buy the car and start renovating our bathroom.”

“But that’s not all of it. I was making dinner for my family on Friday. I would have loved to have some vegetables on the table, but we didn’t have any... So, I said to the Lord that it would be so wonderful to have some salad.”

“As I finished my prayer, there was a knock on the front door. A man was standing there with a large box full of vegetables and other groceries. He handed the box to me and left.”

As a Gift

“Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.” (Luke 6:38)

“Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. As it is written: “They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor; their righteousness endures forever.”

“Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on

every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God."

"This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else. And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you."

"Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!"

(2 Cor 9:6-15)



Summer 1993: Returning to Canada



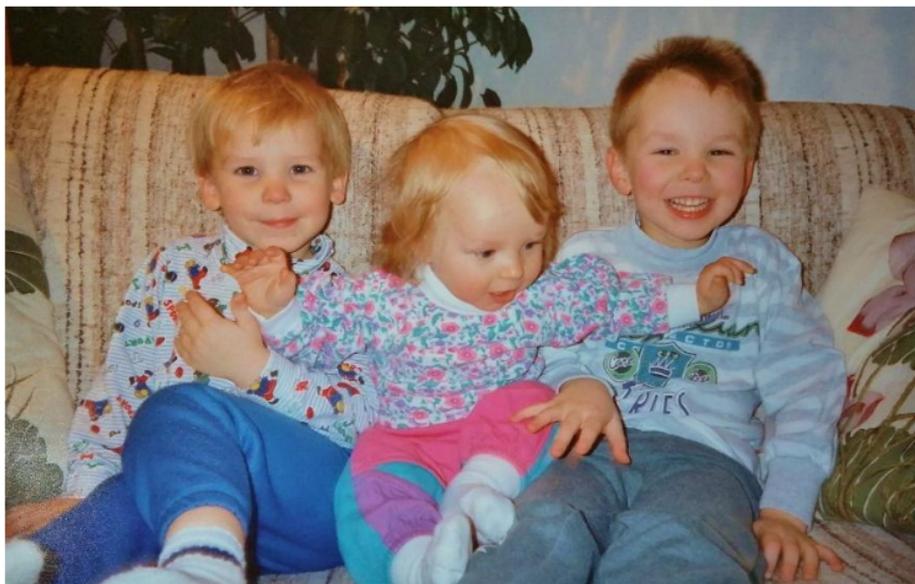
Lake Simcoe, Barrie, Ontario



July 31: Last glance at our hotel room



Our minivan, and sometimes our home too



The little ones in Sudbury in the fall of 1993



Almost like in Finland

Cold Winds

The warm and beautiful summer was slowly being pushed aside by the rainy fall. We had now stayed with the friendly Dutchman and his now 13-year-old son for nearly two months. For us, it had been a time of rest after the exciting and rather stressful first period. The Dutchman told us it was nice to have us living down there in the basement. Our children had become like little brothers and a sister to his son, and our kids were beginning to feel at home, too.

In the past weeks, we had become acquainted with Barrie, and we enjoyed it a lot. The city was good-sized, clean, and pretty. The parks and playgrounds by the lake were well taken care of. Sometimes, we visited the Arboretum, too. The boys loved to run about there among the various trees and bushes.

But one morning, we finally had the first wet snow. It was obvious we needed to move on.

When we moved to Canada from Finland a couple of years earlier, we'd had a large wooden box full of our

luggage shipped over to our new homeland. It was not very much, considering that we were planning to stay in Canada for good. But the parsonage in Sudbury was furnished, and the parishioners had made sure the young pastor with his family was not lacking anything.

All the warm fall and winter clothing was still stored in the basement of the parsonage along with other stuff. We would at least need to pay a visit to Sudbury, about three hundred kilometers north of Barrie.

I called a member of our former church and told the lady about our situation. She welcomed us over right away, without hesitation. There was a slight misunderstanding, however. I guess she thought we were just about to leave for Sudbury when I called.

When we finally arrived, she confessed that she and her husband had been eating beef soup for days—the meal she had cooked for us.

In the past summer and early fall, we had been experiencing God's love and care in Barrie. The same blessing continued in Sudbury, now through the people of our former church.

Altogether, we stayed there with two families for another month and a half. During that time, we visited a few churches in Ontario and did some home visits too, thus having a taste of the work that was in our hearts. Eventually, it became clear that we needed a place of our own. It was November, and we were beginning to

feel the kids were about to forget what a normal life among their own family was.

We turned our eyes back to Barrie. After all, so many events permanently recorded in our hearts had taken place in that city.

It was a rainy Saturday evening when we arrived back in Barrie and checked in at the Venture Inn hotel. Presumably, the staff remembered us quite well. We received the key to a pretty familiar-looking room, and I started making phone calls. There were several apartments and houses for rent in the local newspaper.

The first calls didn't bear fruit. Either I didn't get hold of anyone, or the home had been rented out already. The fifth call pulled off.

A lady with a foreign accent answered the phone. Yes, the home was still available. It was an almost brand-new detached house in a suburb about two kilometers from the hotel. Could we come and take a look at it right away?

Johanna and I were quite excited. We had dreamed of a house, after all. Of course, the rent wasn't very cheap, but hadn't God proved he was able to take care of our needs? And we had received some extra money during the fall. I had even been able to buy a small computer and a printer.

The couple was from Singapore. They walked us

through the house. We just followed them, speechless. Several rooms in two stores, a double garage, spotless, and beautiful everywhere. Could this be for us?

“We would just have one question if you decide to take this,” the man said, looking a bit uncertain.

“We are going to return to Singapore for at least two years. Would it be possible, by any means, that we leave our furniture here? The only pieces of furniture we would be taking with us are the cribs of our twin babies.”

Johanna and I looked at one another. The only piece of furniture we had brought to Canada from Finland was the crib.

We signed a one-year lease and moved to Neelands Street on the first of December. And we got to spend a wonderful Christmas in a home of our own.

It did seem, though, that our Christmas was turning out a little scarce. However, on the day before Christmas Eve, we received gifts and all sorts of delicacies as a greeting from our dear friends in Sudbury. Our hearts were filled with gratitude. It was a blessed ending for a wondrous year.

That was the end of the miracles, too.

Defrosted

Suddenly, everything was changed. We couldn't understand what had happened. It was as if a different page had been turned in our lives. Where was God's providence now?

We felt he had left us on our own, although in reality, he knew exactly what he was doing.

To pay for the rent, I had to take my new computer to the pawn shop. And in the next months, we had to give up our decision not to talk to people about our needs. It was humiliating for us to ask for money from our parents. I had to admit, however, that even though I hadn't noticed it, I had become somewhat proud of our living by faith. Now, there was no reason for that anymore. It seemed we would lose everything.

It was only the one-year lease for our fancy house that we couldn't get rid of.

In the middle of this agony, I tried to push myself ahead. I had left behind my distressing role as a pastor, but I wasn't ready for a new work. The pain within me

was just beginning to surface. But something had to be done. Johanna stayed home with the kids as I did some traveling all across Ontario. We drove around the Finnish communities in the U.S., too, all of us as a family.

Quite by chance, on one of these trips, we found a Finnish Bible study group in the little town of Virginia, Minnesota. We spent a few days in the home of one lady of the group. She told us stories about the history of the Finnish immigrants in the United States.

Still, there was not much work I was able to do. Somehow, we managed through the winter. It was by far the most difficult time of our entire lives.

That is why I was so astonished when, later in the summer, I realized I was being healed. It was as if my innermost being was being revived and brought to life after a long, cold winter. All the miracles of the last year had not accomplished that. It was not until the crushing time of anxiety that the healing began to come forth.

In His love, God was doing far more than I had expected. His provision extended deep into my heart.

“Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.” (Isaiah 43:18-19)

Forgiven

How many times have you asked for forgiveness?

How many times have you been forgiven?

Markku shares: “I think it was the first time I heard God speaking to me. My eleven months of military service were coming to an end. One night, I was lying on my bunk, unable to sleep. All 10 or 11 other young men were asleep. You could easily tell that by the miscellaneous noises in the room.

I was just lying there, tears in my eyes. I can’t remember the reason for it, but I knew I was a sinner. Burdened by it as I was, I tried to pray, but it wasn’t bringing me any relief. All of a sudden, I heard a strong voice speaking to me. The voice didn’t sound familiar, but the words hit home.

‘But isn’t it all forgiven already?’

I was startled. All the grief and anxiety were gone, probably just out of surprise. I wondered why it seemed no one else had woken up. For a long time, I

was quietly pondering the message. I realized it was God wanting to remind me of the work of Jesus on the cross, of the reconciliation.

I knew I had to write it down somewhere! I figured I would probably forget it otherwise. All my notes were in the locker, a sheet-metal closet that would make a terrible screech if I tried to open it. But I had no choice.

Indeed, the sound was shocking in the silence. Yet nobody seemed to wake up.

I found a pad of paper and scribbled the words down on the back of it. I still have the pad somewhere, the words that were said to me in the middle of the night. I just wish it had not taken decades for me to grasp the true meaning of those words.”

It is important for us to confess our sins *“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23)*. Denying our guilt and our wrong deeds, we lie to ourselves, to others, and God.

Confession means admitting, too, that without the help of the Holy Spirit, we easily go astray. Even as Christians, we need to remember that we depend on God’s forgiveness and grace.

But that may give us the illusion that God needs to forgive us over and over again.

Had we lived in the Old Testament era, as members of

the people of God, a new sacrifice would have had to be offered every time we sinned. That was due to the simple fact that the sacrifices of the Old Covenant covered only the past wrongdoings. Should new sins be committed—and they were, lots of them—the sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins would have to be officiated again and again. The coming sins were not yet forgiven.

The fundamental difference between the Old and the New Covenant is that the death of Jesus on the cross is a unique one-time sacrifice. It is not to be repeated. Jesus does not need to offer his life again when we fall.

If we think that Jesus forgives our past sins only, we remain under the Old Testament law. We will always be afraid of falling again, as we know we must then struggle our way back to the merciful God, painfully and once again.

It is a great blessing that the Holy Spirit repeatedly makes redemption alive for us. The problem is that we sometimes interpret this precious experience in the wrong way.

The intention of the Holy Spirit is not to give us the impression that forgiveness is taking place here and now. Instead, He wants to direct our gaze to the once-completed sacrifice, to Calvary.

We need to understand that Jesus died for us in

advance, long before we even existed. That is why, for Him, all of our sins were in the future. Therefore, looking from the cross, there is no difference between our past and forthcoming sins. Jesus died for all of our sins once and for all, and nothing we can do can ever change that. Our forgiveness is based on the unique, final, and unchanging sacrifice of Jesus that was fully completed long before we were born. Jesus has taken our place and given his life for us.

And because of what he did, we can now be saved through faith alone, just by inviting Jesus into our hearts.

“But when this Priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, He sat down at the right hand of God, and since that time he waits for his enemies to be made His footstool. For by one sacrifice He has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.

The Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this. First He says: ‘This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds.’ Then He adds: ‘Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more.’

And where these have been forgiven, sacrifice for sin is no longer necessary.” (Hebrews 10:12-18)

The Holy Spirit

Well, if forgiveness is so comprehensive, does it really matter anymore what we do or how we live?

The question makes sense only if we do not live in a close relationship with God. If we are used to being self-sufficient and independent of the Holy Spirit, we have lost the sense of intimacy with God. Consequently, we no longer sense what kind of influence our doings or undoings have in this relationship.

If we grieve the Holy Spirit, the effect is similar to that in the closest possible human relationship, such as marriage. When you live under the same roof with someone, the relationship is composed of the little things of everyday life. Love and care can be demonstrated in various ways, but hurting the other person is quite easy. And a tiny negligence can grow into a huge problem, just like that.

The situation may change almost unnoticed, with no major quarrels. Everything seems to be alright, for the most part. But in reality, we are gradually becoming

colder and less passionate in the relationship. Eventually, there may be no communication left.

This is exactly what may happen in our faith. It does not mean that the New Covenant based on the sacrifice of Jesus would be threatened. In fact, there is nothing we can do to break it, for this covenant was made between the Father and the Son.

We are just moving further away from the relationship that may have once been the most important thing in our lives. Our first love has faded, and that brings immense grief to the Holy Spirit. Unless we begin to long for a closer communion with God, the day may come when we finally break up with Him.

So, does it matter what we do or how we live?

There is a familiar story about a bunch of fools whose cabin was pitch black inside.

The fools were sitting in their cabin, pondering how they would be able to bring light in there. After long and thorough thinking, they settled upon a brilliant plan: We'll take sacks, open them up outside the cabin, let the light in, close the mouths of the sacks, bring the sacks in, and then open them up again inside. Voilà! Clever!

The same description can be found in the Bible, too. Maybe slightly rephrased. Jesus was telling how many people search for the true meaning of life. They try to

fulfill their life with things that cannot give satisfaction. The thirst remains.

The other side of the story is just as relevant. When some of the fools tried to bring in the light, the others figured they could take their sacks and carry the darkness out.

Well, that's a wonderful idea! Surely our life becomes so much better if we try really hard. All we need to do is quit doing bad things or stop even thinking of them. Then everything will surely brighten up.

But maybe we should take the story a little further.

The cabin had become the property of creditors a long time ago. The fools thought they still owned the place, although they were just tenants. And even though they didn't quite realize it, everything they had went to the rent. Still, the cabin was becoming more and more deteriorated. The landlord didn't care the slightest bit about the condition of the shack.

Then something happened, a sudden change of ownership. Somebody had bought the shack for an excessive price. For an insanely high price, that is. Who was the new owner? Didn't he know what the cabin was worth?

One day, there was a knock on the door. It had to be the new owner. Didn't he have a key of his own? What

was he up to anyway? Should we let him in? After a thorough pondering, the fools felt encouraged enough to open the door. A bright light flooded the hallway. The new owner was standing at the door, smiling.

There was something pure and exceptionally friendly in him—a sense of trustworthiness. The man asked: “May I come in?”

The fools looked at one another. They hadn’t noticed it before, but the cabin was in terrible shape. Now you could see all the dirt in the dazzling light coming through the door. The dummies were about to yank the door shut. They were so ashamed of the shack. But then again, it didn’t seem to bother the man standing at the door. If they closed the door, would they be left sitting in the dark again?

The man stepped in and said, “I just came to let you know that I have purchased this cabin and redeemed it in full. From now on, you are free to live here for no cost, you do not need to pay any rent at all. All utilities are included. The electricity is free. And I have ordered and paid for a full cleaning package for the cabin.

The fools were dumbfounded. They said nothing; it all sounded too good to be true. Why would anyone give them so much as a gift? But there was something that raised questions above anything else. What was that “electricity” he mentioned?

The fools had lived in the darkness for so long that

they had almost grown accustomed to it. They had to admit that their life was pretty hard sometimes. There were mornings when you just didn't want to open your eyes at all because you couldn't see anything anyway. Despite all their effort, they had found no solution to the problem of darkness.

There were some peculiar items in each room, though. The fools had never been able to make anything out of them. The white glass tubes were dirty and seemed to be broken.

Now the man walked to one of the tubes and asked, "Do you mind if I replace this?" He swapped the tube with a new one, and suddenly the room was filled with light!

The fools almost started to jump all over and shout. Then they remembered their Finnish roots and restrained themselves.

How was this possible? Where did the darkness go? Could it happen in every room of the cabin? Was it the "free electricity" that did this?

The light and warmth reflected from everyone's face. There was no trace left of the weariness and frustration. The new owner spoke with a soft voice, "If you need more light, you can reach me anytime."

Closer

I remembered that evening quite well. I had concluded my military service a few months earlier and received my driver's license too.

Now, it was fall, and I was sitting in my dad's car with my girlfriend Johanna. The car was parked at the back of the church office building in Porvoo, Finland.

Something had come up at the Bible study that bothered me a bit. What did they mean by saying that the Holy Spirit lives within every Christian? How do you know that? Can you somehow feel the presence of the Holy Spirit?

I'd never thought of these kinds of questions before. I had been part of the youth group of our church since my confirmation. I had even been one of the group leaders in a few youth camps. We had a great band of young people led by a terrific youth pastor, with whom I used to have fierce table tennis matches.

Still, it was not just about having fun. Faith had become more important to me. The evening prayers I

had learned at home grew in substance, and my trust in God had grown.

Maybe it was just the wish to have a better grip on the doctrine that raised those questions. After all, it was only a few weeks ago that I had begun my studies with the Theological Faculty at the University of Helsinki.

I decided to ask my girlfriend for her opinion. What does the presence of the Holy Spirit mean? She replied quite frankly, "We could pray about it."

So we sat there in the car and Johanna prayed for the Holy Spirit to come into my life and make God's love and his Son Jesus alive to me. Or something like that. The prayer was brief and simple.

As far as I could tell, nothing happened. Then again, I wasn't expecting anything.

Then, a few days later, I made a peculiar discovery. Somehow, I just knew the Holy Spirit was within me. He was in my body and my heart. He was not merely a theological doctrine anymore. He was a living person. I couldn't put it into words, not at that time, anyway. The communion with God had become alive, and I knew I belonged to him. From that day on, I knew I was a disciple of Jesus.

But it took me a long time to fully realize the depth of what happened through that small prayer in the front seat.

Now, more than 10 years later, we were in Canada. It was a warm sunny day in May in the middle of the most difficult time in our lives. Coming from the yard of our leased home, I was just reaching for the front door when I sensed God speaking to me.

"If you wish, we can stop this."

I halted and remained standing at the door. The words sounded very personal.

"If you wish, we can discontinue this. But in that case, not everything I have said to you can be fulfilled. Anyhow, I promise to bless your life."

Of course, I didn't know anything about the future. However, I was positive about two things.

First of all, we had moved to Canada for good. There was no way we would move back to Finland.

And secondly, I knew I wasn't going back to the Lutheran ministry. I had been so convinced about it when we left Sudbury that I had given up my ordination and returned the certificate of ministry to Finland. You cannot remain ordained if you have no position, someone had claimed at the University. I was never going to be a pastor again.

Sigh. I could never have imagined we would move back to Finland in just a couple of years, having lived in Canada for merely five years. And even less could I have anticipated that seven years from now, after

pastoring both a Pentecostal and an Evangelical Free Church for a while, I would return to my spiritual roots as well, to the Lutheran ministry.

Standing at the door, I didn't know anything about what was to come. I could only let my thoughts wander back to the past years.

I thought about the call of God for a ministry I had together with Johanna. The provision and care that we had seen last summer came vividly to my mind, almost like a slideshow. However, the uppermost feeling was the excruciating pain and agony of the past months.

What could this other path be like?

I was quiet for a long time. Then I replied, "No, let's continue."

Epilogue

The child-like trust in God's guidance and care is not childish or immature. It is a conscious choice that God himself is calling us to make. We were not created to grow independent and self-sufficient in our relationship with Him. On the contrary, Apostle Paul describes growing into maturity as strengthening in this communion:

"So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in Him, rooted and built up in Him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught and overflowing with thankfulness." (Col 2:6-7)

God first created and then redeemed us for communion with Him. He knows us better than anyone, even better than we know ourselves. No one but He can meet our deepest needs and desires. And there is nothing we can compare to a life close to Him. Nothing else can satisfy the longing in our hearts.

Should we wish to follow Jesus, his teaching, and his example, we need to rely on the lead and the presence of the Holy Spirit every day of our lives. Sometimes it

means that we have to give up our plans. And this may well bring a few surprises along our path.

There is indeed no way that an adult can lead a life like that. But a child can. That is why Jesus called his followers to become like little children.

Only as children of God can we truly come to know the love and care of the Father.

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