

| Ponder as | Wander...

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Within the confines of our finite life on this earth, there are defining moments that present themselves on occasion. Now I'm not talking about the routine, mundane moments of life that happen on a fairly regular basis. But rather, I'm referring to monumental, life-altering moments. The kind that drastically change the heart, touch the soul, or forever change the essence of who we are or how we pursue life. These moments of human definition may only happen but a few times within our existence. Yet, when they occur, their impact on the human spirit often has an eternal significance. As I look back over the past sixty years of my life, I can honestly say I have only had a handful of such experiences. These few defining moments not only shaped my faith in God Almighty, but also significantly altered my earthly destiny. A revelation of faith, the birth of a child, the death of a loved one, or the loss of a relationship all possess the potential to serve as events defining the very essence of our human spirit.

Contained within such life-altering events is an element of reflection. A pondering that fills the mind with questions of "what if?" or of "if only?" Such are the reflections that whirl through my mind when I contemplate the circumstances of the past several years of my life. Honestly, they were by far the darkest moments I've ever encountered in all my years. It began with the debilitating illness of my father, requiring months of visits to hospitals, rehabilitation centers, and finally hospice care. Shortly after his death, the shadow of soul-altering definition hovered over my life like a dense fog in a raging sea as within a few short weeks my wife filed for divorce. Within

another few short months I also lost my job as an associate pastor, and within this particular defining moment I was told by my pastor to just go away. Because of the divorce, I was informed it was necessary to walk away from the church I had diligently worked to help plant and build. I was also warned to avoid contact with the members of the congregation, even though I had spent years building relationships with these cherished friends.

These life-altering events blind-sided me over a period of less than six months. Individually, each would have been difficult to navigate. Collectively, they were nearly impossible to carry and literally overwhelming to try to manage. My father's death broke my heart. My wife filing for divorce just weeks after that great loss shredded what remained of my barely beating heart. My pastor's betrayal, along with the death of my personal ministry to which I had devoted much of my life compounded my personal sense of loss. Together, these life-altering experiences literally pierced my soul. Yet, beyond all of that, the ultimate damage came through the local church's abandonment during the darkest hours of my life. This abandonment nearly destroyed my spirit, as my will to move beyond the tragedy suffered a crippling, nearly mortal blow.

Through it all, I spent countless hours pondering the circumstances of my darkest hours. Personal reflections unleash a myriad of emotions and responses. I frantically sought the answers to the questions that milled within the confines of my mind. This reflection brought me to my knees in repentance. It induced conviction while perpetuating humility. It implored me to dive deep into the psyche of my human spirit. It added definition to the strength of my human perseverance. It provided clarity to the depravity of

others, but also, exposed the necessity for forgiveness in order to maintain my own personal sanity. It allowed me to develop a deeper empathy for those in need. It provided insight to the loneliness associated with the world turning its back on those who are hurting and lost. It allowed me to gain a deeper understanding and to tighten my grasp on the faith that gives me hope for a brighter tomorrow. Through reflection, I found healing and encouragement as I stilled my heart to listen to God's voice. And, through it all, I witnessed His faithfulness in the most miniscule details of this human existence.

As I reflect on these most prolific *defining moments* of life, I often continue to ponder certain things. "If my wife had stood by my side during the dark moments of watching my father die, how much different would my life have been? If she had walked beside me through this valley of the shadow of death, how deep would the bonds of commitment have grown between us? If my pastor and church had sat with me throughout my most difficult hours, would I have become a better servant, minister, or even friend?" Would I have developed an even deeper commitment to serve as a pastor or shepherd of this flock? I will never know the answer to any of those questions! But I do know this: God will turn every heartache; every piece of brokenness; every hurt; every pain; every loss and every tear into 'good' for His purpose and His plan for our lives. My former pastor, before sending me into exile from his church, spoke these words of condemnation over my life: "You're too broken to ever serve as a pastor again!" What I discovered through reflection on the circumstances of these past few years is something quite different. Jesus came so that I would have life, and have

it more abundantly. He also declared that His grace is sufficient for me! Because of all my brokenness through the losses in this life, I have discovered and embraced the true depth of God's grace and mercy! I'm currently better equipped to serve as the hands and the feet of my Savior, Jesus Christ. Here I am Lord, send me! I don't know where I would be if I hadn't endured the terrible losses over the past couple of years. But I do know that in-spite of all that this world threw my way, I was both touched and protected by the very hand of God Almighty as I placed all of my trust and my hope into my personal relationship with my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. To those who did their best to destroy the very essence of my being, I have this to say, "God still has a plan and a purpose for my life." What you intended for harm, God has turned to good! "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." Romans 8:28

To God be the glory and honor!

"For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as *we are*, yet without sin. Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." Hebrews 4:15, 16 NASB