

GRACE in the VALLEY

Awakening to God's Presence
When He Feels Far Away

HEATH ADAMSON



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Thank you, Father,
for “Even the darkness is not dark to you”
(Ps. 139:12).

To Ali:
this book is dedicated to you. I am not worthy
to live and dream with you. I love you more.

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may our spiritual ceiling become your floor.

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Introduction

But I Still Love You

Her valley began in second grade.

A tumultuous childhood, abuse, unpredictable parents, and deep darkness made it difficult for the young girl to sit still in the classroom. She was royalty and didn't know it. She was loved but no one treated her as such. All she knew, at such a young age, was that life was hard and God was far away.

Her teacher, frustrated beyond belief with the young girl's antics and misbehavior, had finally reached her limit, and she turned to the young girl's peers as a last attempt for a solution. A vicious solution. There is no way the teacher knew how deep the darkness would be. "I want everyone to come up to the chalkboard, one by one, and write down everything you think about her," the teacher thundered.

There is no way any of the students could comprehend, at such a young age, how much of an impact their actions would have. And so it began. One by one the students walked up to the chalkboard and wrote down how they felt about the young girl. Their words were far from kind.

“Nobody likes you.”

“You’re stupid.”

“Dumbly.”

“Just go home!”

One word after another, written with chalk on the slate board but carved in stone on the young girl’s heart, became much more than a rant or an opinion. The words were prophetic. If only someone was there to show her, at such a vulnerable time and in such a fragile state, that even there, in the midst of that pain, was love. It would take her years to remember that, in her darkest valley, a bloom had appeared.

That second-grade girl matured too fast and aged too quickly. By her early twenties, she had experienced decades of pain in a few years. After a few failed marriages, a life of prostitution, children turned over to the state, and a body racked by substance abuse, she finally tried to take her own life. She made promises and never kept them. She regretted the day her children were taken away. Those around her assumed she built walls to keep them out. She would tell you she built walls to see who loved her enough to climb over them. She was ashamed to look her parents in the eye. She was ashamed to look in the mirror.

Ending it once and for all was the only way. But she was such a failure, she assumed, she couldn’t even take her own life correctly. After her failed attempt at suicide, her parents were strongly cautioned to seek professional psychiatric help. In a last-ditch attempt to save their daughter’s life, they made the appointment. Maybe a heavy regimen of medication could save her? She walked into the doctor’s office alone as her parents waited in the lobby.

That's when her valley began to bloom.

The doctor was aware of her past. He knew she had lost everything. He could see in her eyes the emptiness she longed to forget. "Tell me about your childhood, especially those elementary years," he said. She began to recount the typical things like play at recess, crushes on boys, the games young girls play when they feel threatened, and the abuse. The abuse? That's when the doctor probed further, as this was new to him.

She recounted in detail how her childhood had been stolen from her. It culminated that day in second grade when her peers prophesied on that chalkboard not what they thought but who she believed herself to be. She sat in his office, weeping, as the doctor walked her through a process known as reflection. She could still see the smirks on the faces of her classmates as they pointed, laughed, and jeered. She sat there, crying, hoping someone would rescue her. There was no one to be found. It was the most painful moment of her life.

Unjust. Unfair. Evil.

She couldn't take the embarrassment any longer. Crying in front of someone was not her style, and she certainly didn't want to do so with someone who was paid to care about her. She got up from the chair, shut down the counseling session, and moved toward the door.

"I am not finished yet. Come back and sit down."

His voice shocked her. The audacity of the doctor—to so boldly assume he had the right to speak to her that way.

"I mean it. I have something to say."

For some reason, she didn't run away like she usually did. Not this time. She turned around, sat down in the chair, wiped her tears and nose, and looked at him.

“You forgot the most important part of that day in the classroom. Remember that little boy who walked up to the board and wrote these words: ‘I still love you’? I was that boy. I remember you, and for years I wondered what happened to you.”

Right then and there, it clicked in her heart as she realized that in the darkest moment of her life she had been loved. As a child, had she ignored the words the boy wrote or turned away just before he began writing? Maybe she had seen the words clearly but relegated them to mere sarcasm? She didn’t remember. Pain masquerades as our friend when being vulnerable takes too much courage. Whether she dismissed it, ignored it, or simply did not see love bloom in front of her, she lived for years listening to all of those voices—all but one. The most important one.

Her valley, though saturated in shadows and death, was in bloom. Love drew near and invited her to dare to believe her value. And for all those years, she didn’t realize how worth it she truly was.

Maybe you don’t realize how much you are worth either.

Embracing the display of love from that young boy, though it wouldn’t erase what the others said, would certainly have eclipsed it. That’s what love does. It summons us to the deep place of being vulnerable where what we see is not all there is.

The Mystery

We can wonder if God comes through for everyone but us. We can feel like he is just no longer interested in hearing our cry for clarity and hope. We are convinced we just messed up too many times. We pretend something no longer bothers us. It feels right to think God is mad at us. It feels right to think he gives

up on us. It feels right to think we were just created for the mess we are in, that we deserve it, and that it's simply our lot in life.

You can't always believe everything you feel.

That young girl felt worthless in second grade because of what others thought, said, and did to her. Does that not mean she could have felt loved, valued, and like the royalty she was, had she believed what that boy wrote?

You may relate to a cancer diagnosis, a childhood riddled with abuse, a marriage laden with disappointment, depression, an opioid addiction, or a life racked with financial hardship or loneliness. You may not sleep well at night because of your worries. You may not even feel like there is a reason to smile or laugh anymore. You may have all life has to offer and still feel there's something missing. It's mysterious when everyone else's prayers seem to be answered but not yours. It's mysterious when things work out for them but never for you.

Why mysterious?

We know God spoke the stars into existence and intervening in our situation is easy for him. We know God can and wonder why he doesn't. Or we choose not to wonder and pretend it's all okay. Why doesn't he come to us in our deep need? Why didn't he prevent the painful mystery from happening to begin with? We are stuck with the all-too-familiar conclusion that it must simply be that God either isn't interested, doesn't care, is not as good as he says he is, or doesn't find us worthy enough to step in and prevent the pain.

What if preventing something isn't the primary purpose of love?

Like that little girl, we may give up just before the eyes of our heart see the display of God's love in front of us. We may even

feel like the love of God we see is too good to be true. When the valley of the shadow of death blooms, it doesn't mean our circumstances change or our problem goes away. It simply means we learn to see how loved we are. Solving the mystery is our goal. Answering the spiritual question is our journey. Eradicating the pain and hurt is our solution. Is there something better than these?

Scripture tells us that “the passion of love bursting into flame is more powerful than death, stronger than the grave” (Song 8:6 CEV). If love is stronger, why, then, doesn't death just go away? Why doesn't love stop the greatest of all enemies if it is stronger? Love demonstrates its strength not by preventing the weaker and painful things from happening. Love reveals its profound essence when, though it can win, it chooses to come alongside us and hold us. By not preventing the valley but revealing itself in it, love's great strength is revealed and the object of love's attention—you—have your breath taken away. The love of God doesn't need to prevent anything or perform a miracle to prove itself.

There is something even more miraculous than a miracle. It is embracing the reality that we are loved and deeply valued even in the valley.

The Pasture and the Valley

Love, in its deepest form, is often seen in the shadows.

Psalm 23 beckons us to discover how that love is graciously given in the most unlikely places. It invites us to a haven of intimacy with God when he may seem most distant. One of the most powerful and poetic passages in the entire Bible, from what we

infer is David's writing, is the canvas on which I hope to reveal the contours and colors of this love before you:

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures.

He leads me beside still waters.

He restores my soul.

He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow
of death,

I will fear no evil,

for you are with me;

your rod and your staff,

they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me

in the presence of my enemies;

you anoint my head with oil;

my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me

all the days of my life,

and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD

forever.

The twenty-third psalm is familiar to many of us. Those of the Judeo-Christian faith hear it frequently at funerals. Those still seeking words to wrap around their deep longing for spiritual truth, though they find less comfort in religion, still find it in these words. Much of the psalm is memorized, even if unintentionally, by people throughout the world. Fifty-seven Hebrew words, with a few more in current-day languages, take us all to that place

where we ask why God would spread his banqueting table in the valley of the shadow of death and not the green pasture.

Why would David, the newly chosen king of a nation, refer to God as a shepherd rather than a mighty warrior or ruler? Why did David, though isolated and starving to death when this psalm originated, say he wanted nothing? If God could bring down Goliath, why didn't God bring down those who were trying to murder David? Why did God lead him into the valley of the shadow of death when God could easily take a detour to a greener pasture? In all of our differences in culture, gender, religion, and background, we are all united through the pain and deep longing we experience when our circumstances do not align with our hope in God's character. We experience the hard times, though often not written in chalk, and wonder why God allowed them to occur. We long for the green pasture when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

But remember, Scripture says it's only a shadow.

Do you know that, regardless of what people have said to you or what you've done, God writes on your chalkboard, "I still love you"?

ONE

Learning to See

The LORD is my shepherd.

It is easy, comfortable, and merely human to reduce life to what we see, but your story and my story are being written by the Unseen One.

We squint and stare to read the fine print. Our challenge is not that God writes in computer coding or with complex algorithms. That would only spur us on to crack his code and translate his message. No, he writes with something offensive to our minds and concealed to our understanding.

Mystery.

Chances are, you have been in a Starbucks at least once in your life. If you are part of the rare group who hasn't, I applaud your discipline to either avoid coffee or frequent the local barista. Regardless, the majority of us are aware of the unique language Starbucks uses. I remember when I first learned not to say the

word *medium* and rather to use the word *grande*. The Starbucks barista did not scold me, scorn me, throw me out of the establishment, or acquiesce to my language. No, the barista did something unusual. My order was simply repeated back to me using their lingo. If I ordered a “medium bold coffee with cream,” as I paid, I was informed my “grande dark roast with room” was on the way.

Walk into a Dunkin’ Donuts and ask for a grande and they will give you a medium. Order a medium at Starbucks and they will give you a grande. The language doesn’t change what you’re getting. The language changes your understanding of it.

When we ask God for a miracle in our heart, marriage, home, school, generation, way of thinking, or fill-in-the-blank, he hears us clearly and coherently. When you ask for a *miracle*, God gives it to you, but most often it comes packaged as a *mystery*.

To be clear, Scripture reminds us that our adversary is the author of confusion. God writes not with confusion but mystery. Mysteries are not intended to confuse. They are an invitation to look closely, maybe not at something new but rather something that has been there all along and merely overlooked. We must learn to embrace the mystery without wavering in our confidence in God’s character.

Most often, mysteries reveal our heart. Jesus spoke in mystery for this reason (Matt. 13:11). He said so himself. The educated and intellectual elite wrestled with the mental maze the teachings of Jesus provided, yet the little children flocked at his feet as if they felt comfortable with the conversation Jesus offered. Why were children comfortable with him and the educated offended? Perhaps because children see beyond. Mystery is beautiful to them.

But mystery is just plain scary to us. Our educated and experienced minds churn to force all of life’s experiences into a

mental file. We don't want the clutter; indeed, we cannot even tolerate it most of the time. Our schemas file both the good and bad in a way our hearts can survive. Annoyed by the dysfunction of mystery, we go around them to start again tomorrow. Our prayer lives can evolve into a passive-aggressive pattern as we seek control by knowing, predicting, and pretending to understand.

What do you do when your circumstances do not line up with the goodness of the One you read about in Scripture?

What do you do when what you see does not agree with what your heart knows to be true about God?

Some of us blame God; some ignore him; some try to be him. Inquire of anyone who has implemented these strategies and been successful—and you will find none. We must become good at unlearning what we think we know and less skilled at knowing (1 Cor. 8:2). Mystery is one of the primary means God uses to invite us into a deeper understanding of his love.

Of the 125 unique teaching incidents of Jesus recorded in the Gospels, thirteen begin with statements and the rest start with questions. The primary methods Jesus employed in his teaching can be reduced to asking questions and telling stories (parables). God clothed truth and love and came to walk among us. His goal was not merely to teach us what to believe; he came to teach us how to believe. A follower of Jesus does not just believe what Jesus believes but how Jesus believes. As someone once said, “We do not memorize Jesus; we become like him.”

One of the primary ways we become like him is to enter into one of his parables and live in the mystery where our circumstance, or our understanding of it, exposes where our heart truly is. If mystery was valuable to Jesus when he reintroduced

God to the world, it is valuable to us today. In our valleys, Jesus summons us to peer into the mystery and there discover the miracle.

Learning How to See from the Blind Men

This kind of seeing does not come to us easily. Come with me to that moment recorded in Matthew 20 when God was about to walk past the blind beggar.

And as they went out of Jericho, a great crowd followed him. And behold, there were two blind men sitting by the roadside, and when they heard that Jesus was passing by, they cried out, “Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!” The crowd rebuked them, telling them to be silent, but they cried out all the more, “Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!” And stopping, Jesus called them and said, “What do you want me to do for you?” They said to him, “Lord, let our eyes be opened.” And Jesus in pity touched their eyes, and immediately they recovered their sight and followed him. (vv. 29–34)

Jericho, the “moon city” or “city of palms,” is the place that comes to mind when we think of Joshua.

Remember?

It’s the place where the walls supernaturally fell down (Josh. 6). Jericho is approximately six miles north of the Dead Sea. In the middle of the desert, it was an oasis. An underground spring caused it to bloom regardless of the surrounding environment—a real-life “valley of the shadow of death” blooming. Known as a fertile place, it was only a matter of time before Jericho became a stop for travelers on the way from the highlands of Judah to

the Trans Jordan. Built on top of a mound and fortified with a double wall, Jericho was basically unconquerable.

Moses warned the Israelites, with the Promised Land near, of cities “great and fortified up to heaven” (Deut. 9:1). The sudden invasion and destruction of the city would have caught the attention of nearby cities, and rumors of the great God Jehovah would spread far and wide. Regardless of one’s religious beliefs, Jericho became synonymous with the fact that a God you don’t see can supernaturally intervene in the circumstances you do see.

Hundreds of years later, God would clothe himself with skin and personally walk beside the ruins. In the valley of Jericho (Deut. 34:3), a city of broken walls was now a city filled with broken people. Among them were two blind men, begging and helpless, in the very place where God had once sovereignly demonstrated his power.

Where was God now?

Why would God bring down walls but not open blind eyes?

Maybe the blind men laid their heads against a stone at night to find some relief for their sore necks. A stone God himself had brought down, which used to comprise the wall.

I can just imagine a father and mother walking down the road with their two daughters. One of the little girls asks, “Daddy, why is that big pile of bricks over there? Where did they come from?”

“Well, sweetie. Let me tell you a story. You see, a long time ago, the very ground you stand on was traveled by many. People came from all over to Jericho. I know it doesn’t seem like much now. But there was a day when this was one of the great cities. That pile of stones you see over there is evidence there used to be a very tall and very thick wall protecting this city. But then the God who is highly exalted, the One you currently do not

see, caused those walls to fall down in order to give his people the victory.”

“Daddy, if God is so powerful and can knock walls down, why doesn’t he heal those blind beggars over there?”

If the father is like many of us, in a circumstance that seems to contradict God’s goodness, we may respond like I imagine him doing: “Maybe it’s a fairy tale, honey. God didn’t knock those walls down. If it really was God, then surely he would see the condition of those blind men and help them. The fact that they sit there, blind, is evidence enough for me that God isn’t as good as people think. Maybe he isn’t even there at all.”

And just then, with the dust kicking up from his sandals, Jesus of Nazareth would’ve walked by that family as the blind men cried out, “Son of David, have mercy on us!” What a story they would have to tell of a life transformed by mercy!

How can I imagine someone accusing God by comparing his past goodness to his present inaction? Because I’ve done so myself. I’ve seen God come through just in time only to fret and worry the next time a need arose. I’ve believed God can perform miracles only to think he wouldn’t do so for me when I was sick. I’ve encouraged others to pray and shared stories of answered prayers only to feel as if my prayers weren’t enough when I faced a trial the next day. I know what it’s like to look at the evidence, that great big pile of stones that comprised the wall God knocked down, and use the “blind beggars by the Jericho road” in my life to doubt his goodness.

I remember the first blind beggar I came in contact with.

I was walking down the streets of the beautiful and historic city of Antigua, Guatemala. Known for some of the world’s greatest coffee, Antigua is a hot spot for tourists. I was there

with a group doing some humanitarian and missional work. I walked down the street with a friend and was completely caught off guard by a melody I heard. I just knew that I knew that music, even if the words were in a language I did not understand. I stopped on the cobblestone sidewalk and turned to see a man sitting by the curb singing the old Christian hymn “Amazing Grace.” As I looked, my astonishment at hearing a familiar tune in that old village was soon overrun by my astonishment at the man’s condition. He had no legs or arms, and he was blind.

His outer appearance gave clues that bathing was something he didn’t or couldn’t do. I mean no disrespect, but he was just filthy. His hair was matted. He sat on the curb surrounded by natives and wealthy tourists and begged for money. Instantly moved, I reached into my pocket to take out some money and began walking toward him. I felt my friend firmly grab my arm and stop me.

“Just wait a second. I need to see if he is really in need.”

I was appalled. *Really in need?* The man had no legs, no arms, and by this time we could see his eyes were as white as wool. It didn’t take a PhD to figure out he was in need. It didn’t even take a diploma from a kindergarten graduation class to see this man had no hope unless someone gave to him.

That’s when my friend explained to me something I didn’t understand. He said many of the beggars with disabilities in the country were victims of human trafficking. In bazaars where tourists shopped for souvenirs or humanitarian workers purchased supplies, the beggars were strategically placed. Those physically or mentally disabled, little children, and the elderly were often trafficked to meet a quota by begging. The dilemma is this: if

you don't give to them and they don't meet their quota, their bosses beat them and abuse them for not bringing back enough money. If you do give to them and they exceed their quota, then the quota is raised and you make it more difficult for the beggar in the long run. My friend, who lived near Antigua, needed to find out if this beggar was legitimately begging and able to keep the money or if he was a victim of human trafficking. The answer to this would determine our response in how to meet the need.

The blind beggar continued singing in Spanish and came to the line in the hymn that goes like this: *I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see*. Some of these victims of human trafficking used religion as a cloak for their activity. You may think giving financially to a beggar regardless of their legitimacy or sincerity is good. But remember, perpetuating human trafficking is different than giving to the poor. The world we live in is very complex. And sometimes we complicate what should just be simple. Having compassion and meeting a need requires both wisdom and simplicity. We see this in the life of Christ. After all, he asked a crippled beggar if he truly wanted to be healed. This seems insincere to our western minds, but Jesus did nothing that wasn't motivated by and demonstrated through love. He used the question to reveal the beggar's heart. My friend did something similar by walking up to the beggar, kneeling down, and whispering in his ear, "My friend, if God's grace is so amazing, then why do you sit here beside the road, blind, singing of a God who can heal your blindness?"

I'll never forget the look on his face when the blind beggar abruptly stopped singing and responded. I was told he said in response, "My good friend, if you don't think God's grace is amazing, then you are more blind than I am." These words

brought with them a peace and clarity only truly knowing God can bring. My friend started crying, and so did I. We realized that meeting the man's legitimate need could be as simple as placing some money underneath his hip and letting him know the amount so no one would cheat him. That blind man in Antigua taught me how to see that day. Just like the blind men in the valley of Jericho.

I want you to notice something in the story we see in Matthew's Gospel. The blind men cried out not fully sure that Jesus was there. After all, they were blind. How did they really know he was there? But just because we can't see him doesn't mean he isn't near. They cried out, not for healing or money but for mercy. At that time, the crowd asked them to be quiet. We can infer from the text they told the men to shut up. So the beggars cried out even louder. The word we translate "cry out" means to scream and shriek. They were far from dignified.

They were desperate.

There is a place of vulnerability we must arrive at in our need. Some of us become ashamed of what people think. We sit in quiet desperation, assuming being alone is better than being authentic. Remaining silent when you are by the road in life, begging, can prevent you from encountering the very One who is near you. What I know from Matthew 20 is this: if the blind men had remained silent, Jesus very well could have walked out of that city and they would have spent the rest of their lives begging and blind. They couldn't see those who ridiculed them. They were blind to those who snickered and sneered. They obviously didn't allow their reputation or embarrassment or what others thought keep them from asking God for mercy. When we get to the place where we see no one else around but God, our priorities change.

Jesus continued to walk. A detailed study of the Gospels reveals Jesus is about to wrap up his public ministry and enter into Jerusalem for what will soon become the passion week. Why didn't Jesus stop the first time they cried out? Did he hear them and ignore them? Was it so noisy that Jesus couldn't hear? We don't know. What we do know is that they cried out again. Sometimes we cry out to God once and, when we don't think we get his attention, we make excuses and stop. Sometimes we use God's sovereignty as an excuse to quit. Sometimes we build a theology around why God didn't respond the first time we cried out. What I get when I read the story in Matthew 20 is that it's okay to cry out more than once. Jesus didn't correct them for crying out a second time.

He stopped.

He looked. He asked, "What do you want me to do for you?"

Their response? They wanted to see. In the Greek New Testament, the blind men asked Jesus to heal their *ophthalmoi* (meaning biological eyes). Jesus touched their *ommata*, a word Plato used poetically to describe the eyes of the soul. Jesus touched their *ommata* first, and then their *ophthalmoi* worked properly. The eyes of their soul were opened. I submit to you that there, in the valley of Jericho, a barren place except for one little area where an underground spring irrigated the ground, the blind men saw a valley of the shadow of death in full bloom. God prepared a table for them in the presence of their blindness, poverty, and brokenness.

What caught God's attention in the ancient city of Jericho in Joshua 6 and Matthew 20 was not the condition of his children but their passion. Whether it's walking around the wall seven times in worship and watching it fall or crying out to God when

he is about to pass by, there are times when our love for God in the valley causes us to cry out and worship him regardless of what we see and feel.

When our loved one is sick, we thank God for them and pray. When we can't sleep, we go to Scripture and trust God when we think we can't. When prayer is too hard, we lay down in silence knowing he's not threatened by it. If a friend asks how we are doing, we avoid the trite answer and vulnerably express to them what's going on. We go to someone who loves us and ask them to pray for us. We rummage through our pantry or cabinets and find something to celebrate communion with. In all these things and more, we reach beyond how we feel and dare to embrace his love for us.

What I know is that when I lay beside the road, rather than blame God for why I cannot see, I will cry out to him time and time again, for I know he is near. When we peer deeply through the pain, we begin to see God's goodness and also see the mystery we face as a divine invitation to walk down the path, often a lonely one, toward the valley of the shadow of death.

There, in the valley, surrounded by the enemy and death, we experience the miracle of seeing. There is something else written on the chalkboard of our soul we have forgotten: our name inscribed with the divine hand reserving a seat for us at God's table. Often, God invites us into moments we would choose to avoid to catch a glimpse of the table only he can prepare. A table we, as children of the King, can feast at as sons and daughters.

See?

God's grace *is* amazing.

The scroll of the ancient prophet Isaiah reminds us that God "hides himself" (Isa. 45:15).

Proverbs 25:2 invites royalty, like you and me, to seek out what he hides.

It is not happenstance the Hebrew Sabbath begins at sunset, when darkness begins to lurk and our vision grows dim. Psalm 104:20 says “He sends the night and darkness” (TLB). We remember him in the twilight, when what we see becomes difficult to make out. For in this we truly see.

There are times when God, often described in Scripture as our Father, takes us by the hand and lures us to the barren place so we can have front row seats as he makes it bloom.

The Barren Place Can Bloom

More than four thousand miles wide, the Sahel lies just below the Sahara Desert. May through August brings twelve months’ worth of rainfall. As you can imagine, eight months without rain profoundly affects life. The desert floor cracks. Eyes burn. Dust blows everywhere. Mirages on the horizon become commonplace. Humans and animals alike crave a drop of water, a bite of food. One wonders how long this area can sustain life.

Del Tarr, a missionary and advocate for the underserved, lived on the border of the Sahara for over twenty years and observed this place firsthand. He knew the lonely roads well and recalled how a brief rainy season meant that farmers grew, harvested, and rationed their year’s worth of food, such as sorghum and milo, in a few short months.

The months of October and November were filled with celebration. Harvest filled the granaries with food. In the villages, each adult and child enjoyed a luxurious two meals a day. Using ancient stones to grind the grain into flour, the villagers lived off

what Del described as “yesterday’s cream of wheat.” The mush, while hot, is rolled into little balls and sometimes dipped in sauce. With full stomachs, they sleep.

In December, grain begins to run low and families skip breakfast to conserve food. In January, one meal per day is their sustenance.

In February, the one meal enjoyed by everyone grows smaller. Children become sick in March as their immune systems are weakened from malnourishment. One-half of a meal a day just isn’t enough.

Here is how Del Tarr graphically described the plight of these people:

April is the month that haunts my memory. You hear the babies crying in the twilight. They pass most days with only an evening cup of gruel.

Then, inevitably, it happens. One day a six- or seven-year-old boy comes running to his father, bursting with excitement. “Daddy! Daddy! We’ve got grain!” he shouts.

The father calms him down and replies, “Son, you know we haven’t had grain for weeks.”

“Yes, we have!” the boy insists. “Out in the hut where we keep the goats I found a leather sack hanging up on the wall. When I put my hand inside the sack I felt the grain. There’s grain in the sack! Give it to Mommy so she can make flour, and tonight our tummies can sleep!”

The father stands motionless.

“Son, we can’t do that,” he gently explains. “The seeds in that sack are next year’s seed grain. Those seeds are the only thing between us and starvation. We’re keeping the grain until the rains come again. Then we’ll plant it.”

The rains finally arrive in May, and when they do the young boy watches his father take the sack from the wall and do the most unreasonable thing imaginable. Instead of feeding his desperately weakened family, he walks to the field and, with tears streaming down his face, he takes the precious seed and scatters it in the soil. Why? Because he believes in the harvest.¹

The father took the child by the hand and traversed the space that served only as a reminder that things all around were depleting, barren, and even dead. The father saw what the child could not see. The father saw the days to come. The father modeled the importance of taking what is most precious to us and becoming vulnerable even in the most desolate of places.

When we walk the path of mystery we are tempted to hoard what we have left. In relationships, we are tempted to close off a piece of our heart when we are wounded. In finance, we are tempted to say goodbye to generosity when we fear a financial collapse. In hope, we refuse to believe again, for we cannot afford to be let down another time. In second grade, we believe the lies written on the chalkboard.

One of my favorite names used in Scripture for Jesus is “a root out of dry ground” (Isa. 53:2 NKJV). It’s interesting to me that when planting his Son in the world, God chose an environment and landscape similar to the Sahel: a place where life isn’t supposed to grow. The Savior came to love all of us, even when we feel as if we are in the classroom all alone, experiencing deep pain like the little girl. God causes things to grow when they aren’t supposed to. Why? Because to him, things aren’t necessarily dead; they’re merely dormant. This is what Moses experienced in another desert.

A World Aflame with the Divine

Most of us know the story.

At the age of forty, Moses murdered an Egyptian, and someone discovered his crime. In order to save his own life, he fled Egypt and vanished into the Sinai Peninsula. For forty years, he tended sheep under the hot African sun. He married and began a family. The past he had tried to bury in the sand became a fading memory.

At the age of eighty, on a day like all other days, Moses watched the sun come up over the Horeb mountains. The shadow from Mt. Horeb brought relief from the heat as the desert winds churned up dust like the dry soil of the African Sahel. On that day, as Moses walked past a bush, he noticed something that forever altered his understanding of God.

Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian, and he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. And the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. And Moses said, "I will turn aside to see this great sight, why the bush is not burned." When the LORD saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then he said, "Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." (Exod. 3:1–5)

Moses "turned aside to see" and *then* God spoke. There are some aspects of the spiritual life that God waits to share with us until we turn aside. Even when our situation is void and barren, we must remember we are called to his voice. Turning aside can

be a time of prayer and reflection or journaling. We turn aside when we read Scripture. Turning aside can be much more than a spiritual discipline. It is a posture of heart that dares to believe God is near even when we don't feel so.

Moses saw the mystery—a bush on fire but not consumed. The Hebrew word for “saw” is *ra'ah*, which can mean “to see with the eyes of the soul.” Rabbis teach the bush had been on fire for quite some time, and Moses slowed down long enough to notice. To notice what? A world aflame with divine and spiritual realities. It makes you wonder how many other people walked past the bush unaware that God was there . . . waiting . . . with something to say.

It was in the desolate place near Mt. Horeb that Moses encountered who God truly was. Just because you experience something you don't understand does not mean God is absent. Maybe you need to know that even in your desperate or broken places, your world is aflame with the divine. When you turn aside to God, he will not turn you away.

It was in the dry place of the Sahel an earthly father saw beyond. Like him, God comes and takes us by the hand, for we do not walk alone. Though barren, the harvest field will produce again. God prepares a table for us in the valley. Maybe you need a reminder that the rainy season will come again, and those seeds of prayer and faith, hidden to the naked eye, will one day bloom.

In the Garden of Eden, God took a handful of dirt, breathed on it, and formed humanity. God spoke the world into existence, but he saved his very breath for us. God can breathe life into dead things.

Grace stands before you, like Jesus did the blind men, under the warm Jericho sun. Love stops in Person when you cry out to him. Love meets a spiritual need as the eyes of your soul are

opened by God himself. You may have cried out before with your whole heart only to feel unheard. Your desperation is not in vain when it is directed toward God. When you cry out to him, God will stop for you too. There is a grace for your valley.

David lived through the spiritually dry season, felt the dust in his face, had those closest to him inscribe death on the slate of his heart, and listened to the choir, maybe not of hungry children but of starving dreams, while believing that a better day would come. The source of grace for David in his valley is our source as well.