



Sermon Transcription • Abbotsford

Unexpected Unbelief - (Romans 9:1-5)

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[Please Note: This transcript has been lightly edited for ease of reading. Also, some headings have been added in square brackets to aid the reader in locating portions of the sermon.]

A lot of you know that I used to live in New Zealand, I talk about it all the time. It was a really formative time in my life. I think about it a lot this time of year, because in the autumns there, I would go every morning and I would sit on the ocean at this beach called Rabbit Island. It was about 10 minutes away from my house. That is a picture of Rabbit Island. The water there is actually that colour. It's aqua blue. When people see that picture or pictures like it, of the region where I lived in New Zealand they say, "Why did you move back here?" And sometimes I think the same thing. [Laughter] But the beach there, I would sit along the beach, the beach there, I'll give you a picture of the beach, it looks like that, and it is one of the safest swimming beaches in the world. There's no undertow, it's very gradual as it goes out. I used to sit in my car right along that beach and sometimes walk. You would find, on that beach, about as many people as you can see in that photo. 11 kilometres long, that beach. And it's like that. It's magnificent. Nelson, where I lived, had 310, 320 days of sunshine a year. So when you go to the beach, you go to the beach. It's like a legit experience. I used to talk to people when I got there. I could not believe that there was nobody at Rabbit Island. So I used to tell people there, "Have you been to Rabbit Island?" And they'd be like, "Yeah."

"Are you not, like, amazed at how great Rabbit Island is?"

"Aah, it's okay."

"What do you mean it's okay? 11 kilometres long of white sandy beach. Do you know what it's like to live in rain for seven months of the year? It's amazing. Rabbit Island."

"Aah, it's okay." Sometimes you can be so near a thing that it loses its luster. It just becomes common. We're like that sometimes with the stuff around here. People come from outside of our area, "Look at the trees!" You're like, "Aah, ugh, the leaves get in my yard and I have to rake them, it's so hard." [Laughter]

"Have you seen that mountain over there? How big is that mountain?"

"I don't know, it's okay, Mt. Baker, it's in the US, so it's not as good as..." [Laughter] It's just common, right? We see it all the time. We don't know the masterpiece that's in front of us. I came across a story this week that I want to read to you:

"One day, an employee at a tool company in Indiana spent \$30 for a few pieces of used furniture and an old painting of some flowers. When he got his new stuff home, he decided to strategically hang the picture to cover up a hole in the wall that had been bugging him. Some years later he was playing a board game called Masterpiece in which players attempt to outbid one another for artwork at an auction. Much to his surprise, one of the cards in the game



featured a painting of flowers that looked a lot like the one he had on his wall. So he went online and found that his painting was similar in style to the work of Martin Johnson Heade, an American still-life artist best known for landscapes and flower arrangements. Through his research he found the Kennedy Galleries in Manhattan, which handles many of Heade's works, and asked them to take a look at his painting. They agreed and were able to verify that the piece of artwork covering the hole in his wall was a previously unknown Heade painting, since named *Magnolias on Gold Velvet Cloth*. In 1999, The Museum of Fine Arts in Houston purchased the painting for \$1.25 million dollars."

Can you imagine the person who sold this at a garage sale? [Laughter] "Aah, let's get rid of the painting, I hate that painting, it's sitting by the dog food in the garage all those years. What if we package it together with those ugly couches? \$30!" Sometimes you just don't know what you've got, right? Something in front of you, something magnificent, something familiar. No? Familiarity doesn't always breed contempt, but it certainly does breed indifference. We yawn at the things we're used to. You know that's the case with the faith, though, as well. You can be around the things of God so much that they just become kind of normal to you. You can be near God and experience the life of faith with other brothers and sisters in Christ, and it just becomes sort of, aah. It's okay. I mean, is there anything more magnificent in the universe than the triune God? I mean, by definition, isn't he the greatest thing? So therefore, the time that you spend investing in the things pertaining to him is the best time you could possibly spend. So you go to church, you read the Scriptures, you pray and you spend time among God's people, but after a while, it's just sort of, like, the flower arrangement on that picture near the dog food. It's just sort of there. Meh. We all know stories of people, you know, whose parents took them to church at every available opportunity and they did the family devotions, and they did the little singing together, and they had their little Von Trapp singing family and went around...so near the things of God, and then we find out that one of the kids, later on, just abandons it all because, you know, who cares. "You know what's cool, vaping is cool. [Laughter] But this Christian stuff, aah."

See, I call that unexpected unbelief. It's unexpected because you'd think that being so near to something so magnificent like God would foster a kind of desire to know him, and love for him that would last all your days. But sometimes, unbelief is unexpected. It's among the people who are closest to the things. This passage in Romans 9 is about unexpected unbelief. Now I've got to tell you something, we're starting our sermon series again in the book of Romans; we've been doing it for the autumns of the last number of years. We have reached the point in the book of Romans where it has, perhaps, the most hotly contested verses in the Bible. So, if you want some controversy, you should come back next week. [Laughter] I'll be talking about theology for the next two weeks and you can bring your weapons to that. But, today I want to speak to you more pastorally than theologically. I want to deal with this short passage, Romans 9:1-5, where Paul describes his feelings about the fact that so many of the Jewish brothers and sisters that he has, who should believe in Jesus because he's their Messiah and they've been closest to God as a nation through all these ages, they should believe. And yet, so few do. So what do you do with that? What do you do with the fact that so many people who we know, loved ones that we care so dearly about, even though they've been around the things of God and we've shared them with them their whole lives, they just don't buy it.



So here's what we're going to learn here. Number one, we need to realize that this unexpected unbelief happens. Second, we need to admit it hurts, and then third, we need to recognize it's not hopeless. Alright? So it happens, it hurts, it's not hopeless.

[It Happens]

Here's the first of those. It happens, unexpected unbelief. So here's Romans 9:1-5. The Apostle Paul speaking, he says,

“I speak the truth in Christ—I am not lying, my conscience confirms it through the Holy Spirit—I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people, those of my own race, the people of Israel. Theirs is the adoption to sonship; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of the Messiah, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen.”

Now look. Here's the problem that he's dealing with here. The Apostle Paul was a church planter. That's what he did, he was sent out from one church to go into regions where there were no churches, where people hadn't heard the gospel of Jesus, to preach the gospel to them and then to gather them together in a church. After that happened he would go to the next town and he'd do the same thing. When he went to these towns, he had a specific order that he followed. He said, “To the Jew first, and then the Gentile.” And so when he'd go to a new town, right, he shows up in Abbotsford. He looks for the Jewish population in that town if there are any. And sometimes there was, they had a synagogue in the town, or sometimes they didn't have a synagogue, but there were Jewish women who would meet by the river and he would go down and he would preach the gospel to them. But wherever the Jews were, he'd go to them first. Assuming, of course, that because for all these years they've been near to God, and they have been God's special possession, and all their history has been leading up to this Messiah, this Jesus, that when Paul say, “Hey, this Jesus is yours,” they will freely and quickly embrace him. The problem is that when he went and he preached to these people, they didn't embrace Jesus. They turned aside their own Messiah, and so then Paul would go out and he'd end up sharing it with the Gentiles. And he was finding among the Gentiles a greater harvest. More of them were coming. And this doesn't make sense to him. Like, how is it that these people who were so near to God, the Jews so near to him, who should be expected to believe when they see their Messiah, are rejecting him?

And he goes into detail to talk about the spiritual benefits that they have. Just think about the language he uses. He says they are adopted as sons. It's like God goes into the orphanage of the world and he gets to select a child for his own possession, to be his own, you know, the one who is the inheritor of all of his things. So he goes into this orphanage and he sees all of them, and he selects out one. He selects out Israel from all the nations. They're adopted as sons. They saw the divine glory. When Israel was being led out of Egypt, they saw the glory of God because in front of them, what was leading them during the day, was a cloud, a great cloud, and then at night was a pillar of fire. If you wanted to see the glory of God in the evening, you would walk out with your friends and say, “There it is.”



Yahweh didn't do that for all the other nations. He didn't call them his adopted children. He did it for Israel. They were his own, his special people. He made a covenant. And see that line there? There are the covenants. God chose Abraham and he makes a covenant with Abraham. He doesn't do that with the Babylonians. He doesn't do that with the Assyrians. He does it with Abraham. The temple is in their midst, God dwells with them. Of all the people on the planet who should have loved Jesus, these are them. And yet they don't. They're near the things of God but they rejected the one to whom all of those things pointed. And when Jesus is wandering around the Palestinian landscape of those days, right? He interacts a bit with this problem. Okay, so the Jews should be receiving him warmly, but they're not.

So there's a story told in the book of Matthew, where there's a centurion. He's a Gentile. A centurion is a military man, he's like a battalion leader. And this military man comes up to Jesus, he's a Gentile, he's an outsider. Jesus had been preaching to the Jewish people, they had been rejecting him. This Gentile comes up and he says to Jesus, "Listen, I've got a servant who's ill, can you heal him?" And Jesus says, "Yeah, take me to him." And the centurion says, "Listen, I don't need you to come. Because I know how it works. I'm a man with authority. And when I say a word, I've got minions who carry out my words." Like being the pastor of Northview, right? [Laughter] "They go out, they do my biddings. All you need to do, Jesus, is just say the word, and I know that the demons of hell will run away from you. So you just say the word." And Jesus responds to this guy by saying, "Okay, so here's the thing. Everybody, I have not found this kind of faith in Israel. Like, if you want a model for how it is you're supposed to respond to me, and the authority I have because I am the second member of the Trinity, this guy gets it. So he's receiving me and responding to me rightly, but the Jews who should get this, they don't respond to me rightly." At the end, in Matthew 8:11-12 he says,

"I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, [people like this Gentile centurion. Many will come from the east and west] and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom [the Jewish people, God's own domain] will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

You see, here's my point. Okay? It's a very simple point. The nearness to the things of God does not guarantee love for God. The nearness to the things of God does not guarantee love for God. There is such a thing as unexpected unbelief. In John 6, there's a really interesting story that goes on. So Jesus feeds the 5,000, do you remember this story? That number, 5,000, is probably a reference to the number of men there, they didn't count women and children in those days. And so the numbers are probably 15,000 to 20,000 most scholars believe. So, lots and lots of people needing to be fed on the seashore. The disciples say, "Hey, let's send them away so they can go get something to eat in the nearby towns." And Jesus is like, "Nah, you guys feed them." The disciples are like, "What? We don't have anything. I mean, we've got this kid over here, and he's got five loaves and two fish, but like, that's enough for Peter. [Laughter] The rest of us aren't going to eat that." Jesus is like, "Ah, well give it to me." He prays, blesses it, "Okay, start handing it out." Can you imagine being the people that hand this thing out? Right, you're just handing out, "Here's yours, here's yours," and you're thinking, it's going to run out. But every time you look down in your little basket, there's more. and there's more,



and there's more, and there's more. After a few, what, hundred? You're like, this is fun. Right? And you're passing out the fish <sound of disgust> right, fish for everybody. 15,000 people fed! Can you imagine being on the receiving end of that? You'd be like, woah, this guy can feed 15,000 people with just a little bit. I'm in! Wherever he goes, I'm with this guy. What a miracle!

Okay, so a few verses later, Jesus starts saying, "Hey guys, you remember the loaves and fish? You remember the eating and the...if you want to be my disciples," he says to all these people who are now following him, "if you want to truly be my disciple, you have to eat my flesh and drink my blood." And they're like, "Oh, I don't like that. [Laughter] Could you perhaps soften that a little bit Jesus?" And he's like, "No, I won't. You have to eat my flesh and drink my blood. Do you not like that?"

"No, we don't like it at all."

"Well, what are you going to do?"

"We're going to leave." And they do. John 6:66,

"From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him."

Many of his disciples, the people who saw the feeding of the 5,000. The people who experienced a miracle. That didn't guarantee that they stuck around. So that's a personal thing for me. The idea that somebody can be near to the faith and walk away. So, I'm a Christian today because my sister got involved with a Christian camp. I don't know why she got involved in a Christian camp. It was kind of in our area, I don't know how she heard about it. But she did, she became a camp counselor at this Christian camp in our area. She told my mom that summer, "Hey, it would be really great if Jeff and Meagan," her two younger siblings, "came to camp for the week. They'll have fun." I mean, it's a Christian camp. My mom is thinking, yeah, a Christian camp, what's the worst that can happen? They become a pastor or something? [Laughter] So we went. I heard them talk about the Bible stories (I went to a church, they talked about the Bible, but not the way that those other people did), they talked about Jesus as a person you could know. They talked about Jesus as one who stood in my place for my sin. The one who wanted to make me right with God. That's not what I heard at my church. My church was like, "Hey, Jesus is a good guy, follow the way he does stuff and your life might go well. Here's hoping." But these guys were talking about, no no, you can't do it, Jesus did it, and he wants to be the one who can do it in you. I was like, so he died for me? I remember where I was sitting. This green, shag carpet. I remember where I was sitting in this big auditorium, and the guy was sharing about the death and resurrection of Christ, and he said, "Does anybody want to believe?" My hand was up! Yes! Me! I'm in! Thanks to my sister.

Well, a few years later she went off to college, I remember where I was sitting, at the Red Robin in Seattle, when she came back from college. She was my hero. Follower of Jesus, I wanted to be like her. She came back from college, and she started saying stuff at that dinner that didn't sound very Christian. The way she was living at the time and everything, just everything had changed. The person that I knew, that left our house, had come back and she was completely different. And today if I speak to her, and I have, she just thinks that her time as a Christian was just a bad burrito. You can probably add your own story of those you know who have left it behind. Just because you're around the church and involved in things-my sister was involved in leading kids to Christ in camp. Just because you're



around that doesn't mean it guarantees your future with it. Right? I tell this to people in my theology classes that meet at 6:00 on Thursday mornings. I tell this to students who come out in the evening to learn about Jesus. Just because you're showing up at the event, just because you got up early to learn theology, does not mean that five years from now you're still with it. Unexpected unbelief happens. And when it happens, listen now. When it happens, it hurts. When you see your sister, your brother, your kids, your family, your friends, it just kills you.

[It Hurts]

It killed Paul, you see, the same verses again. Okay, so it happens. Secondly, it hurts. I'll read the verses again, I just want you to listen to his language here, it's very emotive. Romans 9:1-4,

"I speak the truth in Christ—I am not lying, my conscience confirms it through the Holy Spirit—I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish [I mean, if it were possible] that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people, those of my own race, the people of Israel."

If it were possible to switch places, I would. Save them, damn me. Those words there, "great sorrow" and "unceasing anguish," that word "sorrow" is the word that we use for grief. It's a word that's used in lots of different contexts in the Scriptures, but mostly about broken relationships. You know, like, she doesn't love you anymore. He doesn't care about you anymore. Or about the death of a loved one. It's the thing that goes on inside of you when those events happen. And so you've got to connect with the feelings that Paul is describing here.

Most of you don't know that when I was dating my now wife, there was a period where she abandoned me. She broke up with me. I was in Austria at the time. I had gone to Bible college in Austria, and we had been dating maybe four or five months, and I was travelling around Austria with some friends. And I was calling back home, I remember my father when I got home later said, "You spent \$700!" Which I've never paid back. [Laughter] But I was calling back, you know. I remember where I was, I was in Obertraun, Austria, I was at a youth hostel there. I went down to the phone and I called her on the phone. "Hey Jeanne, how's it going? I miss you." Guys, you know how it's like when she's not really into you anymore? Do you remember, those of you who have struggled with this? And you say, "I miss you," and she's like, "Thank you." [Laughter] Oh. You're welcome? "Jeff, I don't know if this is going to work."

"What do you mean?"

"Listen, us, and I've just been thinking a lot, and it's been hard, and I just don't know. I just need some space." Those are exact words. And I said to her, after a long pause, "Um, I'm in Austria. [Laughter] All you have is space." [Laughter]

"No, I'm done, no. I can't do it anymore." Click. It was an Easter Sunday. And I remember...wicked woman. [Laughter] I remember being devastated that day. You know, and I'm with friends and we're travelling seeing these cathedrals and beautiful, you know, it's Easter and they're having festivals all over. So you have these short moments in the middle of the day where you kind of forget about what happened, but something that you see brings your mind back to what happened, and those emotions



flood again, and you're just...you're crushed again. You're ruined. Tears are always at the ready. Listen, when my mother died, I was on the ground. Literally. There were points at which I couldn't get up. I used to go down on Thursdays to see my father, who had lost his wife of 49 years. I used to go see my father, I would do some studying in the morning and he would be in the hallway cleaning out a closet, and he'd come across one of her shoes. And he'd just die right there.

That's what Paul's talking about, that kind of emotion. "You want to know what it feels like?" He says, "That kind of sorrow." And what's interesting about what he says here is, listen, when your loved one dies, there is an intense moment of grief. And then after a while, you don't get over it, but there is a smile that comes just before the tears. So it starts to fade. But for Paul though, he says, "No, this anguish, it's unceasing. It's like a little murmur in my life, it's always there. I just want my family to know Jesus." You know what that's like. It's right to feel this way about our friends and family. It's right for us to say things like, "I wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people." It's right for us to say, it's right for us to feel that way.

[It's Not Hopeless]

Unexpected unbelief happens, and when it happens, it hurts. But look, it's not hopeless. So here's what I want to do, I want to give you at the end here, I want to give you three pastoral encouragements, if you can identify with anything I've said here. I get these pastoral encouragements from the wider context of Romans, okay? There are truths that come out of much of what Paul teaches in the book of Romans about God and what he's like, okay? So here they are, three pastoral encouragements for those who suffer with unexpected unbelief in their lives, or the lives of their family. Here we go. Number one, you need to remember that God keeps those who are his. That God keeps those who are his. If you go back, immediately preceding Romans 9:1, the two verses immediately preceding it are Romans 8:38-39 which say:

"For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

In other words, if you are God's and he has his attention on you, you will not get away. You might wander at points, just like the one sheep who goes off, but he will find you and he will bring you home. That's what he's like. He's an ever-chasing God that way.

I don't want to leave you thinking my girlfriend left me and never came back. I have children with her now. [Laughter] When I got back from Austria, I got off the plane and she was there. I didn't know she was going to be there. I remember what she was wearing. <Breathes out sharply> [Laughter] It's funny, I came off the plane and my family was there, "Yay!" They actually had noisemakers to go, "Yay! Welcome home!" And I was like, "Yeah, whatever." <Turns away> "So, you. Hello." [Laughter] We spent the next four or five days together, you know, just hanging out and stuff. And I realized once again, of course, why there's no way that I'm letting this one go. It just made me, like, okay, that's it, I'm redoubling my efforts here. You know, no matter what happens here, unless she just casts me



aside in the most vicious way, I am after this woman. So I worked at camp all that summer, and my camp was located on the islands just off of Seattle, and she lived in eastern Washington state, about a six hour drive away. I drove that every weekend for nine straight weeks. And when I say weekend, you need to understand, it's not actually...when you work at a Christian camp, what happens is that you get done at noon on Saturday, and you start at noon on Sunday. So I would leave at noon, you know, the last camper would be at my cabin, "Okay, see ya." You know, and I'd run to the car, get in the car, <screeching noise> six hours later across the state, show up for basically dinner, have dinner with this dear woman, and then I would talk to her, and then I would go to sleep, wake up the next morning and drive back. Nine weeks in a row. Kept coming, man. Listen, that winter, I've shared this before, that winter, the snowstorm, right, there's a wedding on the other side, it's not my wedding but somebody else's. Snowstorm, I'm driving through the snowstorm. No snow's going to stop me. I get there, burst open the doors, she's sitting there, the bride is sitting there, they think it's the groom walking through, no it's no groom, it's Jeff. Right? Boom! [Laughter] Walk through those doors, and everybody's like, "Oh, it's Jeff." And Jeanne's like, "Oh, it's Jeff!" That's right. [Laughter] I just keep coming. That's what it looks like to be an ever chasing boy. You know that God is like that, right? That's the way that he's described. When he makes a covenant with someone, when he tags them, he says, "Listen, you will be mine. You run all you want." So look, the people in our lives who don't follow Christ right now, you've got to remember that they might be wandering in the moment, but God keeps those who are his.

And because God keeps those who are his, this is the second pastoral encouragement: don't get stuck in a moment. Don't get stuck in a moment. And by that I mean, don't take a snapshot of their life in this moment and think that that is indicative of everything that will be. So, when I first started preaching in this church, it occurred to me very quickly that I was an acquired taste, and that there were some people who didn't want to acquire that taste. And I remember this one guy, who's actually sitting in this room, he was sitting kind of over here, and he was sitting with this woman. And he had his arms crossed during the sermon, and I started noticing him getting very agitated. And him and the girl talking back and forth an awful lot. Now the sermon, admittedly, was on David and Bathsheba, okay? Which was a sermon about sexual sin, David's sins, by basically raping Bathsheba and ends up killing her husband to cover it up. So I was applying this to sexual sin and the cover up that takes place, and how we need to repent just like David ultimately did. So anyways, this guy, about halfway through the sermon just stands up, the girl next to him stands up, she walks quickly out the door, she goes out the door, and he goes to the door and he turns around and he looks at me, and he's got his arms folded, and he does this: <shakes head> [Laughter] And I was like, oh, see you later! [Laughter] I got an email a couple days later: "I was the guy at the door. I was not happy with you sharing my story in front of everyone." I said, "What?" Apparently, this is not his wife. This is his girlfriend that he just started to see recently, and he's cheating on his wife with her and came to church. And the pastor just happened to be preaching on David and Bathsheba, and he thought that was a story about him. [Laughter] And I was like, "Oh man, I'm so sorry. But if the shoe fits..." [Laughter] Okay, fast forward a number of years. So there's a guy sitting on an aisle now, and he's smiling at me and nodding a lot. Right, most of the time people just sleep, right? But this guy's smiling and nodding, and he's looking right at me. And I'm like, oh, how's it going man? Yeah, good to see you. [Laughter] I get an email a couple days later: "Hey, I was the guy smiling and nodding. You might remember me because the last



time you saw me, I was the guy shaking my head at the door.” And he said, “You know, I was at church with my wife.” He said, “I’m just so sorry. I just acted like a crazy man for a bit there.”

So here’s the thing man, if you took a snapshot of him at the door and said, “Yep, that’s the future for this guy. Consign him to hell!” You would be so short sighted, and you would be underestimating the power of God in the most extreme sense. I mean, this is the kind of God who saves guys like the Apostle Paul, who was a murderous creeton. He was trying to kill all the Christians until God knocked him on his backside on the road to Damascus. If you took a picture of Paul and said, “Yep, see that guy? He will never repent,” you would have been so wrong. God is in the business of changing people. You might not be there for the person who’s unexpectedly unbelieving in your life. You might not be able to convince them with all your arguments and your thoughts about all these things, but God is there. And he is on the move to keep those who are his. So don’t get stuck in moment.

He keeps those who are his, don’t get stuck in a moment. So what do you do then? Well, you keep praying. So there’s this lovely little story in the book of Acts 16. Paul goes to a new community, Philippi, there’s no Christians there. So he looks for a synagogue, no synagogue. He shows up at the river and he speaks to these women, these Jewish women at the river. One of those women’s name is Lydia. Acts 16:14,

“One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. [Rich] She was a worshiper of God. [That means that she wasn’t Jewish, she was a Gentile who was what they called a God fearer. She was on the outskirts of the community, interested in the God of Israel.] The Lord [listen to the way it’s written, *the Lord*] opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message.”

You know that’s how people get saved, right? It’s not because you’re amazingly clever. It’s not because you said it in the right way. It’s because the Lord reaches in and he opens the heart. He unlocks the heart, in his sovereign power, unlocks the heart so that they can believe. Here’s the thing. You’re not able to do that, God is able to do that, so what should you and I be doing? Appealing to the one who has the ability to do it. Yes, but I’ve been praying for my friend for so...keep going man! It might very well be that God is going to vindicate your prayers after a length of time that you never expected. One of the greatest stories, I’ll finish with this, one of the greatest stories that I’ve ever heard about that comes from a professor of mine, Howard Hendricks, who passed away a few years ago. He shared this story in classes and other places that I had with him about how his father came to faith in Christ. I’ll read it the way he wrote it.

“The phone rang and I greeted a young pastor friend from Arlington, Virginia. ‘What are you doing?’ he asked. ‘Studying,’ I replied. ‘Nothing special.’ ‘Are you sitting down?’ ‘Yes, why?’ ‘Your father just trusted Christ this evening.’ ‘He what? You’ve got to be kidding!’ I blurted out. Such an inappropriate response grew out of long detours in our father-son journey. Ever since I received Christ as a boy my concern has been for the salvation of my family and loved ones. On repeated occasions I had broached the subject of the gospel with dad, but his response was less than excited. My father has always been a very important person to me. Not that I



approved of everything he said or did or that I imitated him consciously in any way. We weren't really close friends, either. But he was important in my life because of the indirect impact he made upon me. Dad was a military man. He had seen action around the world. During the periods when he was embroiled in battle, I would become very sensitive to his spiritual need. I prayed for him, but at times I'm afraid my faith sputtered. His response was always the same: Son, don't worry about me. I'll work it out with God (as if God could be manipulated like a Pentagon official). Over the years God brought a friend into my life. His name was Butch Hardman. One day before we knew each other Butch was boarding a plane in Detroit when a friend handed him a cassette tape. 'Ever hear Hendricks? Here's a tape you should listen to.' On that tape I related my father's spiritual need. Butch listened and something about the anecdote reminded him of his own father with whom he had shared Christ shortly before he died. He began to pray for this unknown man, George Hendricks. Some months later Butch attended a pastors' conference in Philadelphia where I was the speaker. He shook my hand afterward. That was the only time our paths crossed before a remarkable incident in Arlington. Butch was driving the church bus down the street, having discharged all his passengers. He saw a man standing on the corner who reminded him uncannily of Howard Hendricks. Could it possibly be...? He backed up the bus, stopped, got off, and went over to the man. 'Are you by any chance Howard Hendricks' father?' It is easy to imagine the startled response. 'Er-ah (I can envision my father's critical once-over with his steely blue eyes) yeah—you a student of my son?' 'No, I'm not, but he sure has helped me. Got time for a cup of coffee?' That encounter began a friendship, skillfully engineered by the Spirit of God. Butch undoubtedly sensed dad's hesitancy when he discovered he had met a preacher. For a long time Butch did not invite him to attend his church. He simply suggested that dad drop by the office for coffee. Patiently, he endured dad's cigars and his endless repertoire of war stories. Before long he also learned that dad had been diagnosed as having a terminal throat cancer. Months later Butch was at his bedside. 'Mr. Hendricks, I'll be leaving shortly for a Holy Land trip. Instead of my listening to you tonight, would you let me tell you a story?' Butch had earned his hearing and he began simply to relate the interview of Jesus Christ with Nicodemus as recorded by the Apostle John. At the conclusion dad accepted Butch's invitation to receive Jesus Christ as his own personal Savior. Then dad got up out of bed, stood, and saluted with a smile. 'Now I'm under a new Commander-in-Chief!' That night Butch called me in Dallas. The last time I saw dad alive I could not believe he was the same man I had known. His frame was wasted, but his spirit was more alive than I had ever known. In accordance with dad's specific provision in his will, Butch Hardman conducted the crisp military funeral in Arlington cemetery where the gospel of Jesus Christ was presented to the small group of family and military attendants. As the guns saluted their final farewell, I knew God had vindicated forty-two years of prayer."

Unbelief may be unexpected at times, but man, you've got to know that God is on the move in ways that you can't even imagine. You've got to know that he's able to keep his own. He's like that, our God. He's an unrelenting, ever seeking, ever chasing God.