



## FOREWORD

Jesus took the blind man of Bethsaida by the hand and led him out of the town (Mark 8:22-26). He led him out of the village, away from his friends, away from the familiar sounds and smells. He led him into territory that was unknown and frightening to the blind man. Each step made him more dependent on this stranger. Only the firm but gentle hold that Jesus had on him kept him going.

Sometimes in the midst of perplexing situations – in sorrow, in bereavement, in fear, in anxiety, in depression – Jesus leads His people into the unknown where they are alone with Him; where their very solitude in the midst of pain, anguish of heart and tears blows the lid off their Christianity; when their eyes are opened to see Jesus as they have never seen Him before.

There are times when we may be surrounded by family and friends and yet be alone, so alone, in the darkness of the turmoil of our breaking heart. The widow knows it when the mourners





have gone home; the sick person knows it on the night before the operation; the parent knows it on the night of a phone call which tells of a loved one lost in a far-off foreign land. But just as the artist uses dark shades to complete the picture, so the Lord in His providence uses the shadows of life to show us more of the divine picture of Jesus reaching out His mighty hand to sinful man. It is in the darkness that we hear His voice most clearly: 'Lo, I am with you always' (Matt.28:20, AV).

It is in the shadows that we evaluate things correctly and jettison useless baggage. The learning process must go on – there is much shaping to be done – Heaven's chisel has much to chip away to make us fit for glory. In one of George MacDonald's books we read of a woman, struck by a sudden sorrow, bitterly exclaiming, 'I wish I had never been made.' 'My dear,' said her friend, 'you are not made – you are being made and this is part of the Lord's process.'

'I walked a mile with Pleasure  
She chattered all the way,  
But left me none the wiser  
for all she had to say.  
I walked a mile with Sorrow  
And ne'er a word said she.  
But Oh the things I learned from her  
when sorrow walked with me.'

In this book Irene Howat has gathered together, in her usual sensitive way, twelve honest, moving experiences of ordinary men and women who have walked in the shadows of life and have felt the reassuring hand of the Man from Galilee.

I thoroughly recommend this book as it deals with realities.

Kenny MacDonald  
January, 1998





## INTRODUCTION

A decade ago I was browsing in the bookstore of the seminary where I was teaching. On the used book shelves I spied a copy of Irene Howat's *Finding God in the Darkness*. I bought and read it. Not long afterwards I was back in a pastorate. I kept referring to the testimonies in this book; I thought how helpful they would prove to any number of our members; and in a flush of uncharacteristic generosity I decided to purchase a number of copies to give out as 'free-bees' in our congregation. Only to find it was out of print. In such a case one can only tell the publishers how highly you regard such a book and urge them to reprint it. Which may explain why I was asked to write this brief essay.

So I have to ask myself, Why my strange attraction to this little book? What is it about Mrs Howat's collection of testimonies that makes it so beneficial to Christians who read them? Why does this tiny tome pack such value for the Church?





First, these testimonials *lay open a secret fear Christians have*. They are very much like Ruth 1:1-5 in that respect. That is a scary text. It speaks of one famine, two marriages, three funerals, ten years—all in five verses. And seems to tell the reader right at the start: ‘Life can be like that. It only takes five verses for your whole world to cave in.’ One paragraph can turn life on its head. Being constitutionally a chicken, I don’t relish facing such scenarios. Yet I need to remember that there is no reason such multiple distress should not come to me. Mrs Howat’s work assists the Scriptures in bringing to the surface our hidden fears in all their variety. We have no guarantees of immunity regarding our children, our marriages, our health, our minds, or our work.

The proverbial ‘can of worms’ may prove an apt, if unsanitary, analogy. Allegedly, one is not to open such a can because ‘Who knows what it may contain?’ But there’s another angle on that: sometimes it’s useful to open the can and let the worms crawl around on the table. Sometimes it can be helpful to know what the ‘worms’ are actually like instead of allowing them to be shut away in mystery, un-faced and unaddressed.

Secondly, this book underscores that *adversity and darkness constitute the ordinary ‘stuff’ of the Christian life*. We sing Charlotte Elliott’s fine hymn (which was not written as an evangelistic tool but to reflect a Christian’s struggle for assurance):

Just as I am, though tossed about  
with many a conflict, many a doubt,  
fightings and fears, within, without,  
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.

Yet it is easy for us to forget that this describes the Christian life.

There is a *Peanuts* cartoon strip in which Charlie Brown asks Linus what he would like to be when he grows up. Linus’ response?





‘Outrageously happy!’ The ‘prosperity gospel’ so much in vogue today proclaims that Linus’ dictum captures the way believing life should be. Three words in Hebrews 11:35 give the lie to that: ‘others were tortured.’ The context in Hebrews 11 speaks of the victories, successes, deliverance, and feats of power enjoyed by those in times past who walked by faith. But in the middle of verse 35 with ‘others were tortured’ a whole different gamut of believers’ experiences appear in the list: mockery, flogging, stoning, being sawn in two, with animal skins for clothing and dens and caves for home. These latter experiences were not due to some sort of defective faith. The writer clearly says that the whole raft of these believers (including those wading through brutality and destitution) were ‘commended for their faith’ (v. 39, AV).

The stories Irene Howat collects give full scope to this ‘other side’ of believing experience, that Christians, like their Lord, so often ‘walk in darkness with no glimmer of light’ (Isa. 50:10). In fact, the trial may not be relieved this side of glory. Witness Katie Morrison telling us that it did not look as though her story would have a ‘happy ever after’ ending. Somehow it is helpful and mentally consoling to know that afflictions and distresses are not intruders that place question marks after our faith but the very stuff of the Christian life that authenticates our faith.

Third, a number of these accounts *alert us to the need for attentive care within the church*. How we learn to prize those brothers and sisters who stand by our side in the dark. But it is sad to read Kay Reid’s segment about being ‘alone within a fellowship.’ After the shattering and then ongoing infidelities of her husband and his walking away from her and the family, with the subsequent (and almost relieving) divorce, she found she had become a sort of leper within the church. Couples no longer invited her into





their homes; others were embarrassed to be around her, most likely because they didn't know what to say. And, as she says, 'Worst of all, no one touched me—no hugs, no reassuring pats, no arms around the shoulder.' So this little primer may sensitize us to seeing through the eyes of the sufferer. Not that we need an excess of finesse or skill—simply inviting such persons over for lunch after church shows we want to include them, that they are part of us and cared about. We needn't feel compelled to solve their quandaries or relieve their heartaches—but they will be heartened that we simply recognize those distresses or think of them as they are facing them.

Again, this collection is especially valuable because *the sketches come from recent, non-celebrity representatives of God's persevering people*. By 'non-celebrity' I mean believers whose names are not household words. I recognized the names of two of the contributors. My living west of 'the pond' may explain that. Obviously, readers in the UK may well recognize (or personally know) more of the contributors. My point is that these are not some breed of star-studded super-Christians but are—as we sometimes say in the American south—'folks'; in this case, fellow believers who stand on the same ground as we and yet have by grace plodded through the thick of trouble.

Sometimes the encouragement is not as convincing when the testimony comes from one of our 'canonized' Christians. One might appeal to the way Spurgeon endured a particular trial, but then we may raise the quiet objection that well, yes, but Spurgeon was Spurgeon (or Calvin was Calvin, or M'Cheyne was M'Cheyne) and naturally one expects him to excel in this perseverance business. The appeal to the Christian 'all-star' can be counter-productive.

I well remember how one of my seminary professors unknowingly made this error. Since he is now deceased I may refer to him





by name—Dr Gleason Archer. I recall a chapel address Dr Archer was giving. Isaiah 58 was his text. He was making an application about not ‘doing your own pleasure’ on the Sabbath and urged us as seminarians not to study for seminary classes on the Lord’s Day. I agreed with the point he was making; but when he tried to marshal support for it, he shot himself in the foot. For he recollected some of his seminary and graduate school days, said that he had never studied on Sundays, and then added the non-clincher: ‘And *I* never had any trouble!’ What Dr Archer couldn’t hear were the silent rejoinders surging through most mortal students’ minds: ‘Of course, you didn’t have any trouble! You know x-number of languages and have superfluous gobs of brains oozing out of your ears!’ His own abilities and achievements were so far above us that they negated the encouragement he intended to give.

That is not the case with Mrs Howat’s friends. One feels they would be perfectly at ease having tea at one’s kitchen table. I have been careful not to call them ‘ordinary,’ primarily because I do not think God has any ordinary people. (One finds most all of them, after one gets to know them a bit, to be remarkable in some way or other).

Then too, the testimonials here are of relatively *recent* vintage. Perhaps mostly from the 1980s or 1990s. I myself like history for recreational reading, and that frequently supplies me with sermon illustrations. Where there lurks another danger. If I’m not careful I can, by the bulk of my illustrations, subtly give people the impression that God’s sustaining grace primarily operated in the ‘killing times’ of the Covenanters or with Andrew Bonar in the nineteenth century. But these stories help redress that possible imbalance. Here are folks in our own ‘time zone,’ as it were, and the Lord has made them able to stand in the midst of their ‘crud.’ Grace is also a current affair.



Finally, I think there is a kind of ‘undertow’ one feels when reading through this book; one feels caught by *a quiet assurance that all we’ve heard about God’s strong grace is true*. I have sometimes felt the same effect when I have been making a pastoral call. Here is a man or woman telling me of a trouble they were in or a dilemma they had faced (sometimes severe, sometimes relatively minor) and rehearsing how the Lord—perhaps by simply some small token of assurance—had made them able to stay on their feet and keep on clinging to him. I don’t think these people were conscious of the fact that they were bearing testimony as they disclosed these things. But that’s what they were doing. And my inner response was: Grace must be real after all. ‘[He] will sustain you to the end’ (1 Cor. 1:8, ESV) is no smokescreen. And the stories here help us to go on believing it, for they tell of wobbly people who went on standing or of some who dropped into the pit and yet found that God’s grace had built a floor in the pit. There is more ‘glue’ in grace than we have imagined.

There’s an obvious grammatical shift that takes place in Psalm 23, though it may be that our familiarity with the text keeps us from noting it. In verses 1-3 David always speaks of Yahweh his shepherd in the third person (he...he...he...) as he describes the Shepherd’s ordinary care; but when he comes to the valley of the shadow of death (or, ‘valley of deep darkness’) in verse 4, he speaks in the *second* person—‘you are with me; your rod...your staff...’ In the darkness he no longer speaks *about* the Shepherd but *to* him. It’s as if in the darkness the Shepherd seems nearer. And that, I think, is the testimony of this little book.

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