

CHAPTER 2

He Will
Replenish What
Life Has Taken

He didn't look omniscient. He looked intelligent, with his horn-rimmed glasses, gray-flannelled suit, and stack of documents. He was smart, prepared, and every bit the statistician his profession demanded he be. Otherworldly and prophetic? Divine? Clairvoyant? I saw no halo. No attending angels. There was a glow to his face, but I chalked that up to the afternoon sun that fell through his office window.

"Let's see," he said, flipping through a binder of graphs and reports. "The two of you will live until . . ." He looked up long enough to say, "If you want to see for yourself, I'm on page seven." He paused while we caught up. My palms were beginning to moisten. Denalyn's eyes had widened. We'd been given dates before: due dates for our daughters, graduation dates from college, save-the-day dates for weddings. But a death date? Gave new meaning to the word *deadline*. Did we want to know his findings?

His full-time job was life insurance. Over the phone he'd told me, "I want to make certain you have what you need."

To do this, he needed two pieces of data: the amount of premium we were willing to pay and the number of our years

YOU ARE NEVER ALONE

remaining on earth. I could supply the first. He said he could supply the second. And now he was about to give it to us. “What if his date is this week?” I asked Denalyn. “Should I arrange for a guest speaker for the church?” She didn’t smile. Neither did he.

He spoke with the casual tone of a hotel attendant reviewing reservation dates. “Mrs. Lucado, I’ve got you here with us until 2044. Mr. Lucado, your date of departure appears to be 2038.”

Well, there it was. At least now we knew. I can’t tell you much of anything else he said. I was transfixed on finally having my gravestone data. I knew the first number: 1955. I knew the next mark: a one-inch-long dash. (I measured it on a headstone once just out of curiosity.) Now I knew the second number: 2038.

This conversation occurred in 2018. I was down to, gulp, twenty years. I was three quarters of my way to crossing the Jordan. Armed with this new piece of data, I couldn’t resist calculating my remaining resources:

- 168,192,000 breaths (Sounds like a lot. However, I used more than 2,000 writing the first draft of this chapter introduction.)
- 108,000 strokes of golf (or in my case the equivalent of ten games)
- 7,300 nights in bed with a sleeping beauty named Denalyn (a number that seems more than I deserve yet far less than I desire)

My list also included remaining presidential elections, Super Bowls, summer sunsets, and blooming-bluebonnet seasons.

The exercise reminded me of an oft-ignored truth: we are

HE WILL REPLENISH WHAT LIFE HAS TAKEN

running out. Running out of days, dates, and dances. The hourglass was irreversibly flipped the day we were born, and we've been depleting our resources ever since. We don't have what we had yesterday. Our spending is outpacing our deposits—a fact, I think, that explains the reasoning behind miracle number one in the ministry of Jesus. He was at a wedding. Mary, his mother, was present as well. She came to Christ with a problem. “They have no more wine” (John 2:3 NIV).

Had I been the angel on call that day, I would have intervened. I would have placed a wing between Mary and Jesus and reminded her about the mission of her Son. “He was not sent to the earth to handle such mundane, day-to-day tasks. We are saving his miraculous powers for cadaver calling, leper touching, and demon casting. No wine? Don't whine to Jesus.”

But I was not the angel on call. And Mary enlisted the help of her Son to deal with the problem: empty wine ladles. Folks in first-century Palestine knew how to throw a party. None of this wedding and reception in one evening, no sir. Weddings lasted as long as seven days. Food and wine were expected to last just as long. So Mary was concerned when she saw the servants scraping the bottom of the wine barrel.

Fault poor planning by the wedding planner. Fault guests for guzzling more than their share. Fault Jesus for showing up with a troop of thirsty disciples. We are not told the reason for the shortage. But we are told how it was replenished. Mary presented the problem. Christ was reluctant. Mary deferred. Jesus reconsidered. He commanded. The servants obeyed and offered the sommelier what they could have sworn was water. He sipped, licked his lips, held the glass up to the light, and said something about their

YOU ARE NEVER ALONE

squirreling away the best wine for the farewell toasts. The servants escorted him across the room to see the six vats filled to the brim with fruit of the vine. The wineless wedding was suddenly wine flush. Mary smiled at her Son. Jesus raised a glass to his mother, and we are left with this message: our diminishing supplies, no matter how insignificant, matter to heaven.

I have a curious testimony to this truth. During one of my many less-than-sane seasons of life, I competed in Half Ironman Triathlons. The event consists of a 1.2-mile swim, a 56-mile bike ride, and a 13.1-mile run. Why was a fifty-year-old preacher participating in such endeavors? That's what my wife kept asking me. (Don't worry. I didn't wear a Speedo.)

During one of these races I prayed the oddest prayer of my life. Four of us traveled to Florida for the race. One of my friends had invited a competitor from Indiana to join us. All told, I knew these three participants. There were at least two hundred people whom I did not know, a fact that proved crucial to my story.

I finished the swim, if not dead last, at least nearly dead and almost last. I mounted my bike and began the three-hour trek. About a third of the way into the cycling portion, I reached into the pocket of my shirt to grab some GU. GU is a packet of easily eaten essential nutrients. Well, guess who forgot his GU? I was GU-less with a good thirty miles to go. One doesn't find any GU-selling convenience stores on the triathlon road.

Like you I've offered innumerable prayers in my life. I've prayed for the enfeebled as they died and for babies as they were born. I've prayed for broken hearts, homes, and bones. But I had never prayed for GU. Yet what was I to do? No GU means no go for an old guy like Max.

HE WILL REPLENISH WHAT LIFE HAS TAKEN

So I prayed. Between puffs and pedal strokes, I said, *Lord, this very well might be the only time in eternity you've heard this request. But here is my situation . . .*

Did GU fall from heaven? Well, sort of. The fellow from Indiana, the friend of my friend, one of the three people I knew out of the entire field, just “happened” to pedal up from behind me.

“Hey, Max, how’s it going?” he asked.

“Well, I have a problem.”

When he heard of my GU-lessness, he reached into the pocket of his biking shirt, pulled out three packs, and said, “I’ve got plenty!” He handed them to me and off he went.

You may very well be thinking, *Lucado, that is a lame example of answered prayer. I’m dealing with disease, debt, the threat of layoffs and letdowns, and you’re talking about something as lightweight as GU in a race?*

That’s precisely my point.

Indeed, I think that is Jesus’ point. Of what import is a wineless wedding? Of all the needs of people on the planet, why would bone-dry wine vats matter? Simple. It mattered to Jesus because it mattered to Mary. If Jesus was willing to use divine clout to solve a social faux pas, how much more willing would he be to intervene on the weightier matters of life?

He wants you to know that you can take your needs—*all your needs*—to him. “Be anxious for nothing, but *in everything* by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God” (Phil. 4:6, emphasis mine).

In everything—not just the big things—let your requests be made known.

Mary modeled this. She presented the need to Christ. “They

YOU ARE NEVER ALONE

have no more wine.” No fanfare. No drama mama. She knew the problem. She knew the provider. She connected the first with the second.

My kids did this. They had a way of telling me exactly what they needed when they needed it. I never received a phone call from one of them saying, “Please be a good father to me today, Dad.” Or “I declare in the name of good parenting that you must respond to my deepest desires.”

What I heard was “Can you pick me up?” “Can I get some money?” “May I spend the night with my friend?” “Will you help me with my homework?” “How did you become such a brilliant, wise, and handsome father?”

Okay, that last question might be a stretch. The point is, my daughters made specific requests. Did I recoil at the specificity? Was I insulted that they dared to tell me exactly what they needed? Of course not. I was their dad. It was their way of saying, “I depend on you.” It falls to the father to heed the need and respond to the request of the child.

So I ask, Have you asked? Have you turned your deficit into a prayer? Jesus will tailor a response to your precise need. He is not a fast-food cook. He is an accomplished chef who prepares unique blessings for unique situations. When crowds of people came to Christ for healing, “*One by one* he placed his hands on them and healed them” (Luke 4:40 THE MESSAGE, emphasis mine).

Had Jesus chosen to do so, he could have proclaimed a cloud of healing blessings to fall upon the crowd. But he is not a one-size-fits-all Savior. He placed his hands on each one, individually, personally. Perceiving unique needs, he issued unique blessings.

HE WILL REPLENISH WHAT LIFE HAS TAKEN

A precise prayer gives Christ the opportunity to remove all doubt about his love and interest. Your problem becomes his pathway. The challenge you face becomes a canvas upon which Christ can demonstrate his finest work. So offer a simple prayer and entrust the problem to Christ.

Again Mary is our model. Look carefully at her back-and-forth with Jesus. In verse 3 she presents the need: “They have no more wine.” In verse 4 Jesus is curiously unreceptive to the request, saying, “Dear woman, that’s not our problem. My time has not yet come” (John 2:4 NLT).

Jesus apparently carried an appointment book. He had a time of revelation in mind, and that day in Cana was not the intended moment. He went to the wedding for the purpose of, well, going to the wedding. His to-do list that day did not contain the entry “Turn water into wine.” Angels were not lining up to watch miracle number one because, as far as the Angelic Committee on Initial Miracles was concerned, the moment of the maiden miracle was scheduled for a later date.

Hence, Mary’s petition was met with Jesus’ hesitation.

You’ve heard the same. In your personal version of verse three, you explained your shortage: no more wine, time, vigor, or vision. Your needle was on empty; the tank had run dry; the bank account was showing a negative balance. You pleaded your case in verse 3. And then came verse 4. Silence. Quiet as a library at midnight. The reply did not come. No deficit-erasing deposit was made. When no answer comes, how does your verse 5 read?

Mary’s could have read as follows:

“She stomped away in a huff.”

“She declared that she no longer believed in her Son.”

YOU ARE NEVER ALONE

“She said, ‘If you loved me, you would answer my prayer.’”

“She said, ‘All these years of doing your laundry and cooking your meals, and this is the thanks I get?’”

Mary’s verse 5, however, reads like this: “His mother told the servants, ‘Do whatever he tells you’” (John 2:5 NLT).

Translation? “Jesus is in charge. I’m not.” “He runs the world. I don’t.” “He sees the future. I can’t.” “I trust Jesus. Whatever he tells you to do, do it.” *Whatever* means whatever. Whatever he says, whatever he commands. Even if his “whatever” is a *nothing whatsoever*, do it.¹

Mary made it clear: Christ was the king of the wedding. She might as well have placed a crown on his head and draped a robe on his shoulders. Thirty years of living with Jesus had taught her: Jesus knows what he is doing. She had faith, not that he would do exactly what she asked, but that he would do exactly what was right. Her belief in him gave her the strength to say, “If he says, yes, great. If he says, no, fine.”

Something in the explicit faith of Mary caused Jesus to change his agenda.

Standing nearby were six stone water jars, used for Jewish ceremonial washing. Each could hold twenty to thirty gallons. Jesus told the servants, “Fill the jars with water.” When the jars had been filled, he said, “Now dip some out, and take it to the master of ceremonies.” So the servants followed his instructions. (vv. 6–8 NLT)

Six water jars would create enough wine for—hang on to your hat—756 bottles of wine!² Napa never knew such a harvest.

HE WILL REPLENISH WHAT LIFE HAS TAKEN

When the master of ceremonies tasted the water that was now wine, not knowing where it had come from (though, of course, the servants knew), he called the bridegroom over. “A host always serves the best wine first,” he said. “Then, when everyone has had a lot to drink, he brings out the less expensive wine. But you have kept the best until now!” (vv. 9–10 NLT)

The miracle of Christ resulted in not just an abundance of wine, but the abundance of good wine.

Cooking wine would have sufficed. Convenience-store vintage would have met the expectations of the guests. A modest sip-with-pizza-on-a-Tuesday-night quaff would have been enough for Mary. But it was not enough for Jesus. Something powerful happens when we present our needs to him and trust him to do what is right: he is “able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think” (Eph. 3:20).

It simply falls to us to believe—to believe that Jesus is king of each and every situation. So make your specific request, and trust him to do, not what you want, but what is best. Before you know it, you’ll be raising a toast in honor of the One who hears your requests.

By the way, if you happen to be around in 2038, we’ll let you know if our friend the life-span forecaster knew what he was doing.

CHAPTER 3

The Long Walk
Between Offered
and Answered
Prayer

Bill Irwin was not the first person ever to walk the Appalachian Trail. He was not the only individual to begin in Springer Mountain, Georgia, and conclude on Mount Katahdin, Maine. Other adventuresome souls have hiked the twenty-one hundred miles, endured the snow and heat and rain, slept on the ground, forded the streams, and shivered in the cold. Bill Irwin was not the first to accomplish this feat. But he was the first in this respect: he was blind when he did it.

He was fifty years old when, in 1990, he set out on the hike. A recovering alcoholic and committed Christian, he memorized 2 Corinthians 5:7 and made it his mantra: “For we walk by faith, not by sight.” And that is what he did. He did not use maps, GPS, or a compass. It was just Irwin, his German shepherd, and the rugged terrain of the mountains. He estimated that he fell five thousand times,¹ which translates into an average of twenty times a day for eight months. He battled hypothermia, cracked his ribs, and skinned his hands and knees more times than he could count.²

YOU ARE NEVER ALONE

But he made it. He made the long walk by faith and not by sight.

You are doing the same. Probably not on the trails of the Appalachians, but in the trials of life. You are walking, not on the path between Georgia and Maine. No, you are walking on a road even steeper and longer—the path between offered prayer and answered prayer. Between

- supplication and celebration
- bent knees and lifted hands
- tears of fear and tears of joy
- “Help me, Lord” and “Thank you, Lord”

Do you know the road? How it grows dark with doubts? How despair tags along as an uninvited companion? If you can relate, you’ll find this story inspiring.

As he traveled through Galilee, [Jesus] came to Cana, where he had turned the water into wine. There was a government official in nearby Capernaum whose son was very sick. When he heard that Jesus had come from Judea to Galilee, he went and begged Jesus to come to Capernaum to heal his son, who was about to die. (John 4:46–47 NLT)

The father was a man of high standing in the court of Herod. He was likely a Gentile. His modern-day counterpart might be a White House chief of staff or a presidential cabinet member. He held a position of status and oversaw a houseful of servants. But none of that mattered, for he had a son who was very sick. The son was a child, just a lad (John 4:49). No doubt the prominent

aristocrat had summoned the finest physicians to help his boy. But no one could. His son still teetered on the brink of death. The dollar is not almighty. Neither rank nor riches can protect their possessors from disease and death. Certainly this father would have given both to see health return to his son.

He lived in Capernaum, a fishing village that served as the base of operations for Jesus. Peter had a home there. Jesus was known to speak in its synagogue. It's not hard to imagine a villager suggesting to the distraught father, "Ask the Nazarene to help your son. He has healing power." Jesus was well-known in Capernaum.

Jesus, however, was eighteen miles away in the village of Cana.³

The official set out. He gave his son's fevered brow a kiss and his anxious wife a promise and then headed northeast around the Sea of Galilee. The trek required food, planning, and a protection detail. A predawn departure would get him to Cana by sundown. If he left at midday, he would have spent the night in an inn or taken up lodging in a borrowed room. Either way, he could not enjoy the walk, stop to see the sights, or visit with anyone along the path. By the time he spotted Jesus in Cana, the official was no doubt weary and worried.

"He went and begged Jesus to come to Capernaum to heal his son, who was about to die" (John 4:47 NLT). Straightforward was this request. Urgent. He didn't mention his position, rank, or title. He didn't promise to make a financial contribution to the cause of Christ. He didn't imply he was worthy of divine assistance. He came to Christ as a desperate father. He *begged* Jesus to come to Capernaum. I envision the man on his knees, perhaps his face on

YOU ARE NEVER ALONE

the ground, imploring Jesus to return with him and heal his son. He not only had a request; he also had a plan of action. In his mind the two would walk side by side from Cana to Capernaum until they stood next to the dying boy.

The response of Christ surprises us. “Will you never believe in me unless you see miraculous signs and wonders?” (John 4:48 NLT).

Goodness gracious, I did not see this starchy question coming, did you? Only one miracle into John’s gospel we hear Jesus saying, “Be careful.” He waved a caution flag against a contingent faith, a faith that says *I will believe if . . .* or *I will believe when . . .*

What prompted this response? Perhaps the attitude of the villagers? They took note of the arriving official with an entourage in tow. They learned of his dying son and the plan to solicit the assistance of Jesus. They followed him, not out of concern for the boy, but out of fascination with the miracles. This was Cana, after all. Word of the water-to-wine miracle was on the streets. Perhaps they were hoping to see another display of power. “Come on, Christ,” their presence suggested. “Show us what you can do.”

Or perhaps Jesus saw contingent faith in the request of the father. The man not only asked for help, but he also told Jesus the way the help should be administered. “Come to Capernaum and heal my son.” As a high-ranking official, he was accustomed to giving directives. He told subordinates what to do and how to do it. Was he doing the same with Jesus? Was his belief in Christ contingent upon the willingness of Christ to answer his prayer in a specific manner?

For whatever reason, Christ felt a warning was in order. In his first miracle Jesus rewarded the unconditional “whatever” faith of Mary. In this miracle he cautioned against the conditional faith of the people. Contingent faith is the faith of sidewalk chalk: it’s beautiful when the sun shines, but it washes away when the rain falls.

The father did not reply to the caution. His heart was a dozen exits down the highway. He did not dispute the fact that some people demand miracles; he simply wanted to stay focused on the task at hand. “The official pleaded, ‘Lord, please come now before my little boy dies!’” (John 4:49 NLT).

His appeal could hardly be more genuine. His direction could hardly have been clearer. “Come now!”

And Jesus responded to it. “Then Jesus told him, ‘Go back home. Your son will live!’” (v. 50 NLT).

Such good news! Or was it? Jesus answered the man’s prayer—or did he? The nobleman had reason to rejoice, then again maybe not. The man asked Jesus to go with him to Capernaum. But Jesus told him, “Go back home. Your son will live.”

This was the moment of truth for the father, the moment he set out on the longest walk. The prayer was offered in Cana. Would the prayer be answered in Capernaum? He did not know. He had to make a choice.

Perhaps the nobleman turned on a dime and floated home on the magic carpet of faith. Maybe he high-fived his way down the path, shouting, “My dying son will live!” Perhaps he slept like a baby that night and awoke with joy the next morning. The sun was shining, the sky was blue, and he skipped and whistled all the way home to Capernaum.

YOU ARE NEVER ALONE

If so, he was a better man than I am. I would've gulped at Jesus' reply. I would've looked first at Christ, then at the road. First one way, then the next. "Are you sure, Jesus? Can't you walk with me, Jesus? My wife is a good cook. I told her I would bring you. Won't you please come with me?"

What if he arrived in Capernaum and the son wasn't better? What if the Messiah had moved on to another city before the father could find him again?

He made his choice. "The man took Jesus at his word and departed" (John 4:50 NIV). He believed in the spoken word of Christ.

While the man was on his way, some of his servants met him with the news that his son was alive and well. He asked them when the boy had begun to get better, and they replied, "Yesterday afternoon at one o'clock his fever suddenly disappeared!" Then the father realized that that was the very time Jesus had told him, "Your son will live." And he and his entire household believed in Jesus. This was the second miraculous sign Jesus did in Galilee after coming from Judea. (vv. 51–54 NLT)

The good news from the servants was met with a good question from the father: What time did he get better? Reply: one o'clock. The very time Jesus had spoken the word.

Jesus had worked a long-distance healing. The miracle was not just in the life of the boy but in the saving faith of the entire household. Isn't that what Jesus desired? The physical healing was an unspeakable gift, for sure. But the boy eventually died. I know of no two-thousand-year-old person from Galilee. The life-giving

THE LONG WALK BETWEEN OFFERED AND ANSWERED PRAYER

miracle of Jesus was short-term. The faith-giving miracle of Jesus was eternal. The household believed in Jesus. This belief resulted in everlasting life.

What about you? Do you find yourself somewhere between Cana and Capernaum? Like the official you offered a heartfelt prayer. You begged Jesus for help. And like the official you didn't receive the answer in the way you wanted. Consequently, here you are, doing your best to place one foot in front of the other, walking the path of obedience.

This is the issue of not-yet-answered prayer. Or not-answered-in-the-way-I-asked prayer. When we request plan A and Christ responds with plan B, how should we react? How do we find the strength to do in our lives what Bill Irwin did in the Appalachians? How do we walk by faith when we are thus far blind to the solution?

May I approach this topic gently? Before I suggest an answer, may I tell you I am sorry we have to discuss the question? I'm sorry you have a yet-to-be-answered prayer. I'm sorry the job did not materialize, the spouse did not apologize, or the cancer chose to metastasize. I'm sorry you find yourself between Cana and Capernaum. Life has its share of dark, dank moments.

And Christ will not remove all the pain this side of heaven.

Did someone tell you otherwise? Did someone assure you that God permits only blue skies and rainbows and sunbeams? They misspoke. Read the Bible from the table of contents in the front to the maps in the back, and you will not find any promise of a pain-free life on this side of death.

But you will find this assurance: "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you" (Heb. 13:5 NIV).

YOU ARE NEVER ALONE

When the father reached Capernaum, he made this wonderful discovery: the presence and power of Jesus had gone ahead of him. He may have thought he was walking the road alone. Quite the contrary. Christ had supernaturally gone into the nobleman's residence and not only healed the son but also won the hearts of the entire household.

Was the father's prayer answered? By all means. It was answered in a manner greater than he had requested.

Yours will be as well. Perhaps the answer will come this side of heaven. Perhaps it awaits you on the other side. Either way, this story urges you and me to keep walking and believing in our God who is our "ever-present help in trouble" (Ps. 46:1 NIV). Don't you love that phrase?

Ever present. Not occasional or sporadic help. You'll never be put on hold or told to check back later. He's never too busy, preoccupied, or away on a prior engagement. God is . . .

Ever present. As near as your next breath. Closer than your own skin. "Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there" (Ps. 139:7-8 NIV). Rehab clinic? He is there. Prison cell? He is present. No boardroom is too superior. No brothel is too vulgar. No palace is too royal. No hovel is too common. "He is not far from any one of us" (Acts 17:27 NIV). He is present. And he is present to . . .

Help. Not hurt, harm, or hinder. He is here to help. That is the message of this miracle.

Do your days feel like a hike on an Appalachian Trail in the dead of winter? Is it all you can do to place one foot in front of the other? If so, I urge you to hang on! Hold on! Don't give up.

THE LONG WALK BETWEEN OFFERED AND ANSWERED PRAYER

Help is here. It may not come in the manner you requested or as quickly as you desire, but it will come. Assume that something good is going to happen. The door to tomorrow is unlocked from the inside. Turn the knob and step out.

Some years ago my wife and I enjoyed a dinner in the Texas hill country home of Gerald Jones. You may not recognize the name Gerald Jones, but you've possibly heard his professional name: G. Harvey. He was one of the finest artists in America.

His house was a G. Harvey collector's dream. Wall after wall of original paintings. Frame after frame of perfection.

Behind the house was his studio, a workroom of unfinished paintings. Partially painted canvases. People with no heads. Mountains with no peaks. Now I'm far from an art connoisseur, but even I knew better than to point out these facts to the artist. How shortsighted it would have been for me to say, "Hey, Gerald, this tree is half-finished." Or "You forgot to paint legs on this horse."

The artist wasn't finished yet.

The Divine Artist isn't finished either. The earth is his studio. Every person on earth is one of his projects. Every event on earth is part of his great mural. He is not finished. "God began doing a good work in you, and I am sure he will continue it until it is finished when Jesus Christ comes again" (Phil. 1:6 NCV).

This life contains many walks from Cana to Capernaum, journeys between prayer offered and prayer answered. Jesus promised the boy's father a sure blessing at the end of the journey. He promises the same to us.

We will meet this father when we get to heaven. When we do, I'm going to ask him about that walk. I want to hear how he

YOU ARE NEVER ALONE

felt, to know what he thought. But most of all I want to thank him for inspiring this verse: “The man took Jesus at his word and departed” (John 4:50 NIV).

Do likewise. Set your compass on the polestar of God’s promise, and place one weary foot in front of the other. Jesus has spoken. Let his word do what it was intended to do: lead you home.