

Dr. Wm. Richard Kremer

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The Power of Faith

Psalm 121: 1-6; John 3:16

A few years ago there was a popular movie called “The Pursuit of Happiness,” starring Will Smith, who played the part of a real-life personality by the name of Chris Gardner.

Chris Gardner had been abandoned by his father early in life. He had lived in poverty, partially because of the choices of others, partially because of his own bad decisions.

But when he fathered a child, he resolved that he would be there for his boy in a way that his own father had not been for him. It was a costly promise, because father and son found themselves living on the streets of San Francisco, living a hardscrabble existence, barely surviving hand to mouth.

Then one day Chris Gardner saw a man come into a parking lot driving a red Ferrari.

Gardner asked him what he did for a living. The man said he was a stock broker.

Gardner then asked a few more questions about what a stockbroker did and realized that the kind of skills required for the job were the very skills he was using to survive on the street.

Chris Gardner resolved that he was destined to become a stock broker.

About that time his life intersected the life of an inner-city minister who communicated to him a message he had never really heard: you are a child of God. You can achieve your dreams, but to do so you must not only talk the talk, you must walk the walk.

He began trying to walk the walk, managing to procure a car and start going from one brokerage firm to another, though he had no college degree, garnering plenty of rejections, and plenty of parking tickets, because he had no money to put in the meter.

Finally, he found a firm that offered him a position in its training program, but when he showed up for work, he found that the man who had tendered him the position had been fired and the offer rescinded.

Chris Gardner finally wrangled another interview with another firm, but just about that time his wife became angry with him over all of his failures and filed a false complaint of domestic violence against him.

He was arrested, and though he was never tried on the case, his \$1,200 worth of parking tickets came to the fore, and since he had no money, he was sentenced to jail.

He got out just in time to make his interview, only to find that his wife had absconded with his car, his clothes, and his son. What he wore to his interview was decidedly ragged.

Naturally, his interviewer asked about his clothes, and though Chris was an accomplished liar, he decided to tell the truth about his wife leaving him and taking all his stuff.

His interviewer interrupted him and said, “Hey, I’ve had the same thing happen to me three times.”

The guy proceeded to tell Chris Gardner about his three marriages and his three divorces and being taken to the cleaners all three times. Then the guy looked at Chris Gardner and said,

“You show up here next week, and Ill personally escort you into the broker training program.”

Chris Gardner floated out of the building. Finally he had managed to stick a foot in the door of his dream.

Finally, he had taken the first baby step toward a career that would result in his becoming one of the most successful and celebrated stock brokers of his generation.

But as he walked out of the building it hit him: it was only because of all the horrible stuff his wife had done to him that this guy connected to him and gave him the break he’d been looking for.

As he walked out of the building, Chris Gardner said, “You know, God sure moves in mysterious ways.”

You want to understand the power of faith? The power of faith begins with a simple conviction.

The power of faith begins with realizing, *God moves*. God moves in our lives.
Faith begins with a basic acceptance of the stunning truth that God cares about us.
Faith begins by accepting the notion that God takes an interest in the narrative of our existence.
Throughout most of his life Chris Gardner had been a man sliding on ice.
His life had no purpose, it had no control, it had no direction. All he had was a spirit full of fear.
Then suddenly a man of faith says to him, "You are God's child. You can achieve your dreams."
Suddenly, he was no longer a man sliding on ice. He was now a man riding a roller coaster.
That made all the difference. For a man riding a roller coaster knows that yes, there'll be ups,
yes, they'll be downs, yes, they'll be curves, yes, they'll be moments that scare him, BUT --
the engineer who designed the roller coaster will deliver him back safely home.
For the first time in his life, Chris Gardner was not living a life of chaos.
He was riding a roller coaster in the belief that the God who designed it would bring him safely home.
That's the power of faith!

That's exactly the sentiment the Psalmist is trying to communicate when he says,
"I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come?
My help comes from the very God who made heaven and earth.
This God who looks after me never sleeps, never takes a day off.
This God is my keeper, my guide by day, my protector by night.
This God cares about my welfare and protects me from evil. This God has watched over
the countless comings and goings of my life and will continue to do so evermore."

The Psalmist is trying to convey the basic spiritual message that our existence is a divine gift
meant to be lived in dialogue with the Giver.

The Psalmist has experienced a revelation similar to the truth gleaned by Albert Einstein
when he was a little boy lying sick in bed, and his father gave him a compass to amuse him.
Einstein noticed that the magnetic needle moved as if influenced by some subtle force field
No mechanism within the compass made it move; it moved in response to an unseen power.
Even as a child, Einstein said he knew, "Something deeply hidden had to be behind things."
So, too, the Psalmist looks beyond the hills, sensing that some deep power has to be beyond things.
He senses that the purpose of faith is to connect one's life to that Something behind all things.
Faith's purpose is to develop a relationship with that Something from which all things derive their being,
tapping into the assurance that the Something provides, turning one's life toward that Something
in the manner of a compass needle turning toward its true north.

People say that the advancement of science will inevitably mean the decline of religious faith.
Their logic is, the more one understands how the universe works, the less dependent one is upon the notion
of any belief in God to cause it or make sense of it. Here is the great flaw in that reasoning.
Science and faith wrestle with different "whys." Science wants to know 'Why does a flower grow?'
A person of faith wonders, 'Why do I have the impulse to plant flowers?'
A scientist might analyze the chemical reactions going on inside a man's brain
as he watches his bride come down the aisle.
But a scientist can offer no explanation as to why a man and woman say to each other,
'I pledge to honor you and comfort you and love you whether prosperous or penniless,
whether successful or failing, whether healthy or infirm, as long as we both shall live.'
That is an arena of inquiry beyond the purview of science.
The scientist cannot understand why a father will pledge to a son, 'Regardless of the cost, I will love
you in such a way that I will bear all things, believe all things, hope all things and endure all things.'

I think of Blaise Pascal, the brilliant mathematician who, among his many achievements, created the first calculator. Pascal observed, "There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every person which cannot be filled by any created thing, but only by God, made known through Jesus." Why do so many people live unhappy and aimless lives? Because they have lost connection to the why of their life. Maybe their life was devoted to watching their stock value rise; then one morning, whoosh, it was all gone. Maybe their life was tied to building a business; then one morning, whoosh, they found themselves in an economic climate where there was no more business. Maybe their life was bent on rising in a company; then one morning, there was no company. At the center of their being they have given themselves to some created thing, and that created thing has failed them as a deity; now their lives are filled with fear and darkness. The only thing that can satisfy that God-shaped vacuum at the heart of your being is God.

Every now and then I pass a little roadside placard in Pineville that says, "Those who believe in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life." I believe that. Indeed, that belief and hope forms the center of my faith. But I am a theologian, and a theologian parses the meaning of words. What does that sign mean by "belief?" Does it simply mean, "believe in the existence of God"? No! Biblical belief is not merely propositional. Belief in this case is what Chris Gardner's little boy means when he said, "I believe in you, Daddy." He was not merely saying that he believed in his father's existence. He was saying, 'On the basis of our relationship together, I believe in your promises. I believe in you.' Biblical belief in God is not propositional, it is relational! The God I believe in is One with whom I converse, the One with whom I argue, the One whom I praise, the One whom I often question, the One to whom I complain, and the One to whom I turn for strength and guidance in my darkest hours. Real faith has nothing to do with intellectual assent to propositions. Real faith is meant living in dialogue with the divine, experiencing a friendship that is alternately contentious, exasperating, exhilarating, mystifying, majestic, confusing, nourishing – and always meaningful. The everlasting life we are promised is not only some heavenly reward known bye and bye – It is communion with the eternal every single day. The power of faith is designed to help us communicate and commune with the eternal every single day.

Somehow I still feel I have failed to communicate the great truth I'm trying to convey. Let me try again, this time by making use of another story. A few years ago there was another popular movie, based on another popular book, which is well worth reading. The title of the book and movie is *October Sky*. It's about a group of boys who hail from the coal-mining region of West Virginia, who, after the Russians' launch of the Sputnik satellite, and after America expressed a determination to go into space, decided that they wanted to build rockets. West Virginia coal-mining boys! One of those boys was in his bed one night, thinking about geometry, reflecting upon axioms, theorems, and postulates, which he sensed are true now, were true in the past and ever will be true. Suddenly he sensed the reality of God speaking to him through his reflections on geometry. He was in his bed, in his room, in the safest place he knew, But the surety and clarity of God's voice speaking to him caused him to tremble.

The very notion that the God of the universe would speak to him, a teenaged hick, so unsettled him that he resolved to go see his pastor the next day. He ambled down to see his minister, a kindly but conventional Methodist minister, the Reverend Lanier. When he started talking of God talking to him through axioms, theorems and postulates, the preacher said, "You're talking about arithmetic. All of God's Words are here in the Good Book." Young Homer Hickam left him disappointed, but undaunted. He walked down the road to see the Reverend Richard, the African-American pastor whom he had come to know by delivering him papers. When he told the Reverend Richard what he had experienced, the man said, "That can't be nothing but God's plan." Young Homer said, "I just want to know how to build a rocket." The minister replied, "If that's all you want, pray on it and God will provide." Then the Reverend laughed: "Boy, don't you be frettin'. God is love. Don't you know that? God ain't never gonna hurt you. He's got plans for you and for all you boys." And with that he sent him on his way.

Do you see the difference in those approaches to faith?
One man's faith was circumscribed.
His religion couldn't deal with an experience of God that came mediated through geometry.
For him, God's Word was contained within the words of the Bible.
For him, faith was just a matter of believing the propositions expressed by the words.
The other pastor realized that the God who made heaven and earth regards all of creation as grist for dialogue with God.
This pastor sends this young man out into the world to find God's will through his rocket work with the understanding that in working out his salvation with fear and trembling his relationship with God will deepen through his ongoing dialogue with God.
Homer Hickam will keep building his rockets until he emerges from the mines of West Virginia and becomes one of NASA's chief engineers.

The Lord is the strength which comes to you from beyond the hills.
The Lord is your shade on your right hand and your protector in the night.
Those are not just words, my friends.
Those are meant to be the way you live your existence in dialogue with the divine.
Through dialogue with the divine you learn the ability to trust the God who gifts you with life.
The power of faith will not eliminate the shadows from your life.
The power of faith will not dispel the darkness or the pain we all must face from time to time.
But the power of faith can remind you that even in the lowest part of the roller coaster of your life, *you are not alone. God is with you.*
And if you can learn to trust God along the roller coaster of your existence, you will turn your life into a divine quest and a great adventure.
And when you sense in the depth of your being that life is an adventure and a quest, then my friends, you will have come very close to understanding the purpose of your life.
Such is the power of faith.

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Fourth in the Series, The Powers That Shape Our Being