ALTARS OF LIVING STONES

Building Faith One Testimony at a Time

ALTARS OF LIVING STONES
BOOK 1

PATRICK AQUILONE



The events and conversations in this book have been set down to the best of the author's ability, although some names and details have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.

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SAMPLES

This contains three chapters (plus the intro chapters) of the book "Altars of Living Stones" by Patrick Aquilone. If you enjoy these free chapters, we would love for you to check out the entire book which can be obtained by going to the Altars of Living Stones website (http://www.altarsoflivingstones.com) or searching for it on Amazon or use the QR Code.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Before you begin, I want to drop a couple of quick notes about this book. Included are testimonies that are important to me, major events that have shaped my faith and formed living stones on my spirit's altar of faith, helping me grow in Christ. They may not have the same impact on you, and that's okay.

Firstly, this book was a pouring out of my heart and soul, with the intended audience being my children and grandchildren. God later told me to share these testimonies with everyone else for His glory and the building of everyone's faith. This simply means I wrote this from a perspective of sitting around an intimate campfire with my family. Since God has expanded the audience, I edited the book in a way to hopefully explain the events better, so anyone can read the words and understand the context.

Hopefully you won't be too confused, but if you are, I apologize in advance. Although I did write this with my family in mind, God guided my hand with you in mind as well. I don't know which parts will speak to you, but I do know God has a purpose for your reading this, and I'm excited for you to come on this journey and see where God takes you.

That said, here are a few "**dos**" and "**do nots**" with this book.



DO take whatever speaks to you and leave the rest. God uses different things to speak to different people. Some can hear a sermon and be inspired to become a missionary. Others can hear God while watching a movie and charge out to start a church. Still others can hear a song on the radio and be inspired to share Jesus at work. No one approach affects everyone the same way, nor does any one testimony impact people the same. Our God is a God of variety — not every testimony has to speak to you. Take the ones that do ignite your spirit and make them part of your spiritual growth. The ones that don't? Feel free to move past them. The goal is to provide a toolbox of testimonies that will be used by different people in different ways, building them up in the body of Christ in love. God only knows if a testimony you read today may be the thing you need to hold on to tomorrow.

DO NOT waste time struggling with belief. Neither God nor I would want your faith to be shaken by anything within this book. If you don't believe something you read, just move on past it. I love this quote from a professor at a Christian University, "*I'm not here to shake your foundations … unless your foundations can be shaken!*"

In other words, I'm not trying to preach to anyone or convert anyone or make anyone change churches or change your convictions. I'm just retelling what I've experienced personally, so that hopefully somewhere in this book is at least one testimony that will increase your own faith and help you when you're facing a trial. Don't let anything keep you from finding those testimonies, because one day your destiny in Christ will need you to have built up your faith. Seek God in the pages and you will find Him, then grab hold.

DO NOT waste time wondering why a miracle you've prayed for hasn't happened yet. I remember sitting a church twenty five years ago, listening to a guest speaker I'd heard several times before, recounting yet another amazing testimony and thinking "Man, I wish I had testimonies like that." And for years following that day, I kept asking God if something was wrong with me because I felt

like I had no powerful testimonies or direct miracles I could tell other people about.

Looking back today, not only can I see how much God's hand has moved throughout my life, but I also have powerful testimonies, just like this man. The difference is back then I somehow thought he had walked out of his house and experienced no less than a dozen miracles a day before returning home, going to bed and then sharing them the following day as he did it all over again. Rise and repeat, day after day.

The truth is those testimonies were created over a lifetime of living for God. If you don't have any testimonies yet, that's okay. Just keep living for Jesus and doing what you know to be true (or anything God tells you to do) and one day you might just find yourself sitting and writing down a book like this, filled with the miracles *you* walked through.

DO pray before you read a testimony in this book. By doing so, you'll open your ears to hear from God. At the end of the day, it's much more important you hear a word from God than a word from Pat. This whole book points back to the Father, not to anything special I've said or done in this world. So pray that your ears will be open to hear Him, and then **DO** follow whatever God speaks to you.

My simple prayer over this book is that God speaks to you personally. One word from Him is worth more than the combination of all the gold, diamonds, gems and precious metals we could ever find on this planet.

INTRODUCTION

It was Thursday, June 20th, 2019, and I was having lunch with an elder from my church, discussing my walk with God and a dilemma I was facing over a recent vision. In the vision, I was standing on a shore with the most beautiful, inviting blue water in front of me. Jesus was calling to me to come in the water and join him, but I couldn't get in the water. No, that's not accurate. I *wouldn't* get into the water. I was too scared. Absolutely terrified.

So I just stood there at the water's edge, crying.

A moment later I was standing outside of my body looking at myself. I seemed to be a child of about eight or so just standing there as Jesus beckoned. I began to yell at myself.

> *"Why are you crying?" "What are you waiting for?" "Just swim out to Jesus!" "Please trust me. Swim out to Jesus!"*

None of this helped me as I stood there on the shore, crying.

I asked the elder if he knew what this meant. His well-meaning answer was "You have to step out into the water!" Now, this would be

great advice if it was clear *where* I was supposed to step out. "Where am I to take this step?" I asked. He had no answer.

I found it oddly strange to be given such an obvious, pat answer which honestly seemed pretty useless to me at the time. I was frustrated. Hurt. But mostly I was confused and scared, because I didn't like the vision of myself and I wasn't any closer to understanding it.

Before that point, I had spent many years not walking in the path God had for me. This isn't to say I wasn't in church or not walking a righteous path, just that the path I was walking was my own doing, my own design and creation. I had fashioned it out of what *I* wanted the path to be, not checking with God on if I was even remotely correct.

Looking back, I had foolishly not heeded the words of Abraham Lincoln, "*Sir, my concern is not whether God is on our [or my] side; my greatest concern is to be on God's side, for God is always right.*" The problem with my deciding how to achieve an end goal which God may or may not have set for me is I would inevitably find myself outside of the will of God, and therefore *outside of the protection of the Holy Spirit*.

God is far more concerned with my character than how fast I can scale a mountain in His name. This means the path from A to B is almost never a straight line. However, when *I* make the plan, it's the shortest distance between the two points. That's, until I fall headfirst into a pitfall or a trap or an ambush. It's easy to rationalize that others have taken the exact road, so therefore it must be the way. God would obviously want me to walk the exact path others have walked, right? Wrong!

I'm no longer able to count how many times I've been wrong second guessing the path that God wanted me to take. Each time I've chosen the path instead of walking on the path God would want me to, I found myself frustrated and confused and walking towards anything but my destiny.

I knew from a very early age that God wanted me to be a pastor and preacher. This meant that I would need to make my way through the leadership of a church on my way to my God destiny. I learned from several sources that the best path to becoming a pastor of a church was to start as a Children's worker because they always need help and there's always a need. From there, one could theoretically

work their way up to the Children's pastor, and once there you might be able to hop over to Youth Pastor, and we all know Youth Pastors eventually become Associate Pastors, right? Then the Associate Pastor migrates to become the Senior Pastor of the church when the current pastor retires or becomes the Senior Pastor of a separate church plant.

Sounds super easy… in theory. Just get in at a low level and work your way up the corporate… um… I mean, *ministry* ladder, until one fine day — *BAM!* — *you* become the pastor.

Now, for some people this might be the exact path God used to bring them from Point A to Point Z. However, there was a problem with the way I was approaching it. What problem, you ask? God wasn't in it. I mean, I heard God tell me I was going to be a pastor. No question. But then I devised a plan on how to go about it.

The simple truth is if you want God involved in what you do, you have to let God design the plan. You have to let God promote you when He believes it's time, and to what position He wants you in next. Truthfully, you might never be a youth pastor. Or a children's pastor. Every person's road is different, and if we leave God out of it your goal will be empty and without power.

For me, I cannot tell you how many times I served on the Sunday School or Children's church teams where the position of Children's Pastor became open and I was unselected, unpromoted and confused. I was passed over, time and time and time again. And I, in my infinite wisdom and oh-so-spiritual maturity, wouldn't stop at simply crying before the Lord.

Oh, no, I would have words with the staff who didn't promote me, and when they inevitably failed to correct their obvious mistake? I would pick up my family and jump ship to another church who would better appreciate me and my gifts.

I was saved in a small church in upstate New York and, moves notwithstanding, thirty years later I've been a member of no less than a dozen churches. (Not to mention kicked out of one for assaulting the Associate Pastor.) A great track record of faith. A real resume of a mature disciple of Christ, and what a stellar witness to my children.

So there I was sitting in a restaurant, discussing with an elder in my church about all of this and more. I was dealing with a lot of

things: offense (*how come I haven't been used of God or seen as important?*), bitterness/jealousy/envy (*how come <u>that</u> person God elevated in the body when I should have been?*) despair (*will I <u>ever</u> be used of God?*) and pride (*how come everyone outside of the church thinks I'm great and capable, while people in the church can't see the light of day?*).

I was a mess, and I felt like not only did everyone know I was a mess, but no one outside of my family really cared. This created a deep, deep ache inside me, a mix of earnest yearning for the things of God, combined with spiritual wounds which tossed me around like a ship battered by storm surges, fighting to tear me apart.

"…and that's when he began to talk about a memorial."

The elder finished speaking, breaking back into my train of thought like a train robber hijacking an engine.

"Who brought up a memorial?" I asked. "What does a memorial have to do with my issues? Were you even listening to me?" Granted, I had obviously not been listening to him, but his statement forced me to focus all my attention on him. I was somewhat in shock but listened as he continued.

"Pastor Myles brought up the Israelites and how God told them to take large stones and build a memorial," he continued, "so that when the children and grandchildren asked why they were there the elders could speak of all the amazing things of God."

While this was cool information, I was completely lost. Since I hadn't been paying attention, I had no context as to what this meant or why the elder was even talking about it. It was clear that he was sharing something about himself and his life that had culminated in the idea of a memorial. I had a deep feeling in my spirit that this was something important, something God wanted me to hear. However, it totally felt like I was trying to go to New York and the elder boarded the two of us on a flight to Los Angeles. Still, I continued to listen as he recounted a story from a recent family holiday dinner.

"I was sitting at the table and brought up a miracle that we [his wife and him] had walked through. I knew every one of my children at the table had been present when this event happened. I went around the table and asked them to tell me what *they* recalled about it, and I can't tell you how shocked I was at their answer.

"Each of my children had a *piece* of the whole story, but none had *the complete picture*. To make it worse, if we were to paste together the pieces they collected it wouldn't be enough to see the real power God displayed in that miraculous event."

He paused smiling. "We decided to share the full testimony with the rest of the family. Then we decided not to just stop there, but to continue to pass down our testimonies of miracles to our children and their children." He leaned in closer. "What we're now doing with our children is what the Israelites did when they planted memorial stones!"

When he said the words "Memorial Stones," for whatever reason I heard "Altar Stones." I didn't know exactly why I heard that, as I consciously knew what he'd said. However, in my mind the phrase continued to echo: "altar stones." I didn't say a thing, kind of brushing it off as me just being weird, and we continued our meal. While I nodded a lot during his sharing, at the time I didn't see anything in his story that pertained to me and my situation, specifically, and didn't give it the attention it deserved. Looking back, I regret this.

Today I try to look at every conversation with someone else as an opportunity to learn something, knowing the person I'm speaking with has information I don't have and I can grow from the exchange. At this lunch, I wasn't that man yet, and was mentally dismissing — albeit politely — any discussion that wasn't focused on me.

Eventually we finished lunch. As we were parting, he encouraged me that whatever edge I was on, I should take the leap and trust God, relying on previous testimonies to help me soar through whatever was ahead of me. I shook his hand, thanked him and went on my way.

When I returned to my car, as much I tried to push it out of my mind, I had two things swirling in my head. The first was whether or not my kids truly understood the testimonies we, as a family, had walked through. I was unsure, but resolved to talk with my wife about it. The second was the word "Altar" that would just not leave my mind, rolling around and around and around, nonstop. Just when I thought I had gotten on to something else, it would come back.

It got to the point it was so deafening, I genuinely couldn't think

about anything else. I resolved to pray about it, albeit I was going to be more praying for God to remove the phrase from my mind than asking what He might be trying to say to me. At that point in my personal prayers, I was much more focused on providing God a list of demands or requests than I was taking the time to listen and seek out what He might be saying to me. This was all about to change.

When I got home, I spoke with Vicky about how the elder's children had completely missed God acting when it was right in front of their collective faces. We both concluded that our children were much more observant about these things, and surely wouldn't have missed God in the moments. She nodded a lot, and we finally decided we should put our theory to the test and talk to our kids about one of the largest testimonies we walked through: when God gave me new kidneys (*covered in full in a later chapter*).

Much to my dismay, our children faired about as well as the elder's kids. I had incorrectly assumed the elder's family missed it because they weren't attentive or maybe naive. However, hearing my own children having missed massive parts of our testimony gave me a new perspective. I quickly realized, in our misguided attempt to shield our kids from the reality that their father might die, we essentially kept them from seeing the full power of God at work.

Immediately I repented, asking for forgiveness. This was followed by Vicky and I sharing the *full* testimony with them that night, and they were all amazed at the power of God and thankful to Him for saving their Dad. We decided from that point forward to make sure our children (and *their* children) knew just how awesome and faithful our God was.



Saturday June 22nd, 2019

As hard as I tried, I couldn't get the word *altar* out of my head. It seemed to be around every corner, embedded in every sign, hidden in every lyric and popping up on every television show. It was literally *everywhere*, so much that it soon became super, *super* annoying.

After everyone went to bed that night, I cried out to God asking

Him to show me what this was all about. He responded to such a degree that I felt like He'd turned on a virtual firehose and drenched me with it. There was a lot to take in, but the biggest thing He revealed was the idea of an altar of living stones.

He showed me how within everyone's spirit's an individual altar made up of living stones, representing all the different events that have impacted and built our unique faith foundation. Living stones could be constituted of virtually anything. A timely word received from someone at just the right time. A miracle, either witnessed or taken part in. A scripture, reaching through time and space to make an immediate impact. How someone directly shared Jesus, either through words or in action. There's virtually no limit to what a living stone could look like! Yet each one represents a stone placed on the altar of our spirits.

God then showed me when He instructed us to build ourselves up on our holy faith (Jude 1:20), we essentially approach this altar in our spirits and recall all the amazing things God has done. This allows us to get our focus on Him and be built up in faith to handle whatever was coming next. God showed me the altar of living stones in my own spirit, instructing me to write a book with the largest ones to pass down first and foremost to my children, then to others to help build their faith as well.

The book you hold in your hands is the culmination of this journey.

Needless to say, I was blown away. Not only for the amount of information being poured into me, but for the fact He was providing me the very next step along the path. Immediately I knew what the vision of myself crying on the shore was about.

I had always wanted to be a science fiction or fantasy author. I absolutely loved the idea of crafting stories and creating worlds. I was about as far as one could get from writing a non-fiction book, let alone one based on the faith events of my life. I'd never once conceived of writing anything remotely like this, and yet God was calling out to me, beckoning me to trust him and come out to him, just like Jesus did with his disciples out on the water.

For a moment, everything seemed to align in my mind as the new

knowledge saturated my soul like never before. Suddenly, I *knew* what God wanted me to do. I *knew* the path He wanted me to walk. I *knew* where I was going, the direction I needed to go.

All I had to do was to trust God and step out in faith.

Seemed easy enough. (*Hint: it wasn't.*)

About a week later I was worshipping, still marinating on all God had given me. I hadn't started writing the book yet, hadn't even created a template or opened my book writing program. Simply put, I hadn't stepped out into the water. As I was worshipping, I was taken in a vision back to the beach where I stood on the shore. Jesus was still there in the water, waiting patiently for me.

This time, instead of just watching myself, I was there, in my body. I took a very small step forward, just enough so my toes became wet. As soon as I did, Jesus took a step closer to me. Seeing this, I took another small step toward Him, enough that my heels starting to get wet. Again Jesus followed suit, although his steps toward me were much larger. Emboldened, I then took several more steps into the water until it was up to my knees.

At this point Jesus ran over to me. I was crying at this point, and reached inside my chest to pull out a blackish, semi-transparent ball, approximately the size of a basketball. Weeping, I handed it to Jesus, who smiled and accepted it. Immediately I felt free. Light as a bird, ready to fly and to soar.

I ran deeper into the water and splashed around as Jesus smiled and laughed. The vision ended, and I realized in that moment I hadn't fully trusted Jesus to be my God. Yes, I accepted Him as my Savior, but I didn't *trust* him. This is why I had to work so hard to make my destiny happen because I didn't trust God would do it if I didn't. When I handed Jesus the ball, I was handing Him my doubts, my life. I was handing him my everything, trusting that He would know how to handle it.

Since that moment, I've had days of walking fully in His arms and days where I snatched the ball back. But now I know that as soon as I catch myself doing this, I can give the ball back. Jesus is always so welcoming and forgiving to take it back and love me.

Writing this book of testimonies is part of my trusting Jesus. I'm

stepping out in faith that God will guide me to write the complete truth and not miss anything. I'm trusting Him that my kids and grandkids will read this and build their faith through these words. I'm trusting God that wherever this goes — including if it seemingly goes nowhere — that it will end up *exactly* where and how God wants it to be. I've put everything in God's hands.

Finally, it's my prayer that whatever God wants to impart to you as you read this book becomes a living stone in your own altar. I pray you will have your faith built up, empower and encouraged for whatever God has in store for you in the future. I pray you will trust God with your everything. I can't promise that road will be without storms, but I can promise He will always be walking by your side through it all.

INFERTILITY TO BABY

'Then God remembered Rachel,
and God gave heed to her and opened her womb. '
- Genesis 30:22

"You can't have children."

You may have heard it said that the world crushes in around you when you hear devastating news. It's as if the very fabric of reality becomes a virtual vice, squeezing harder and harder, sucking your very breath and life out of you. Until this moment sitting in our Obstetrician-Gynecologist's (OBGYN) office, I hadn't known it could be so soul-crushing, so impossibly life-draining.

We had gone to this doctor because my wife, Vicky, had been having some difficulties with her woman parts — including, but not limited to, cysts. We'd known something wasn't quite right, and hoped professional insight could help us overcome whatever we were struggling with and get my wife back to "normal." Nothing prepared us for the moment when the world stopped turning and everything suddenly desaturated into dark shades of grey.

Life felt like an old time photo of things long since passed. Stark and lifeless. I honestly felt like I couldn't go on. It was at this moment

that I was hit with a thought so dreadful it almost sent me into cardiac arrest. *How would I ever console Vicky?*

All my life I knew two things with absolute certainty. First, I would spend my life with a wife at my side. I knew from a very early age that I would marry and spend every moment after that in deep love, walking out the rest of my existence staring into her eyes. It caused me great grief when I first began to date and found that not everyone was interested in the idea of marriage or monogamy. Still, I continued to search until that one amazing day I met Vicky.

I knew that I *knew* that she was the one. Even better? She felt the same way. Life with her has been so worth living. Even in the valleys or the dark times, I wouldn't trade it for anything. She is my soulmate whom God selected for me before the foundation of the world.

The second thing that I knew was that I would be a father. I liked to think that I would be an amazing father. You know, Time magazine's Father of the Year cover material. National recognition or not, I knew that I was meant to be not just a father, but a Dad. I was meant to help shape and mold little ones into amazing adults. Like most pre-parent hopefuls, I had a list of things that my parents did great which I was going to mimic.

Dinner together every night as a family. Being ever present with my kids interests in music or sports or gaming or whatever. I had quite a mental list. I also had a list of things that I *wasn't* going to do that my parents did. Things like intentionally embarrassing my kids. By accident, undoubtedly, but I would never set out with the intention of making them embarrassed. I suppose my kids could tell you if they feel I was a good father or not, now that they're adults, but I did know from an early age that I would be a Dad, and I would love it.

You can't have children.

Hearing these words was almost more than I could bare. The doctor would later explain that Vicky has poly-cystic ovarian disease (PCOD), which caused her body to constantly form cysts which prevented and aborted pregnancy. In addition, the cysts would often prevent the natural monthly cycle from operating correctly, making getting pregnant almost impossible. The doctor probably went into more detail at the time, but honestly I didn't fully understand what he

was saying. I was in shock. All I really heard was his words, looping over and over again in my head that *we wouldn't have children*.

I felt helpless, useless, an utter failure.

"However," the doctor continued after what felt like an eternity, "I don't believe a young couple like yourselves should be without hope!"

Hope.

Exactly what I had lost in his first sentence.

A person can move mountains if they believe there's a chance that what they seek is under it, even if that chance is minimal. Hope is a powerful emotion in which God operates constantly. It was hope I needed right then, even though I had no idea what the doctor could ever do to help us. All I knew was that one word, *hope*, my heart went from zero to sixty and I was ready to do whatever it took to fix this.

Immediately the doctor put Vicky on a drug called Clomid. This was to help spur on her baby making parts to…well…make babies. More to the point, the doctor felt that if we could "aid" the monthly cycle, then we would have a better chance at actually having a baby.

Next we began to chart my wife's temperature in the morning because, well, to be honest, at that point I had no idea. But the doctor said to do it, so we did it. Finally — and this was my favorite part — we were instructed to "work" at making a baby. We literally had a doctor's note instructing us to work at baby making, every single day.

It almost seemed too good to be true. An actual doctor's note declaring that we should become as one as husband and wife. It was the greatest thing ever! Well, that is, until it wasn't. With all spontaneity removed, things became passionless and mechanical and honestly, not nearly as exciting or enjoyable as I thought it would be (much to my surprise).

Coupled with all of the above, we had periodic blood work, urine check-ups and a bunch of other things monitored while we worked hard at baby making. It was an arduous process, and pretty well sucked the life out of us as days turned into months and months turned into a year. Before we knew it, we reached a place we never thought we would arrive: we were ready to stop trying.

When we started the journey, we were playful and excited and joyful about the process. Hopeful. But after a year, we were tired.

Working hard to plant seeds that produced no fruit. It was draining every fiber of our lives and our marriage, and some days it felt like there was no end in sight.

We felt discouraged. Disappointed.

But mostly we were just exhausted — mentally, physically and emotionally.

God walked alongside us the entire time, providing us with some much-needed help and encouragement in the oddest ways. Another couple in our church was also trying to have a baby, only both of them were doctors who knew all too well what was going on with them and us. If that wasn't enough, they'd been trying unsuccessfully *for over a decade*, and yet were always chipper and happy and full of love and joy.

We didn't know how they did it, but any time we were down, they were there for us. Their inspiration and love poured into us during the really hard times, because they knew exactly what we were going through. They were constantly pouring fuel into our tanks and helping us hit the gas. What's exciting is how God blessed them since that time. Last time we spoke with them, they had **four children of their own**. So God is good, all the time — even when we can't see it.

After almost two years of trying and charting and taking pills and getting poked and prodded every which way, one week my wife's temperature rose in the middle of her cycle and stayed slightly elevated. Those who have done this knows what that means. At that point, I thought it meant my wife finally produced an egg and we had somehow stumbled across the right mix. Now we could work on getting the egg fertilized and a baby formed!

We were at the doctor's office so often I don't remember how many days later, but I remember the next moment clearly. We had given all the chart information to the nurse as they did the usual urine stuff and checked Vicky's vitals, and then waited in the exam room for the doctor. I was excited because this was the first sign that something was working and God was moving! We were that much closer to having a baby! When the doctor entered the room I could hardly contain myself, I was ready to burst.

"Well," he said, breaking the tension, "It's iffy!"

"Okay," I gulped. "What is our next step?" I knew this was a first step in whatever process we were taking. I just didn't know what was next. I was thinking (dreading?) more baby making, complete with another doctor's note. But perhaps with indications of things moving in the right direction, some renewed passion and joy would revitalize our together times. I kind of had a dozen thoughts running through my head, but was working hard to keep focus.

"We do a blood test," he said.

"A…blood test?" I snorted.

A warm sensation washed over my face. I was fuming. We had painstakingly charted Vicky's temperature and done all sorts of circus acrobatics to ensure conditions had been *just right* for my wife's cycle to get on track, and now I was being told we could have just done a blood test the whole time?

A simple blood test. I was hot.

"You mean all this time we could have known with a blood test?" I clenched my fist, trying hard to control myself, but it had been a *long* two years. "What have we been doing all this temperature taking for?!!"

He cocked his head and squinted at me. "What are you talking about?"

What was I talking about? How did he not know? This wasn't the time to play dumb. We have been working together on this for *years*. *How does he not know?* And why would I have to explain this to him? "You think she finally ovulated!"

"No," declared the doctor, a smile dancing across his face. "I think she might be pregnant!"

In cartoons when a character is shocked or surprised, his mouth drops to the ground. At this moment in time, my mouth most definitely dropped to the ground, which felt like it was a few stories below my feet. You could have pushed me over with a feather, I was so shocked at his words.

So many things raced through my head, yet I sat there, unable to move or say anything. I caught a glimpse of my wife, grinning at me. I almost couldn't believe it. *We might be pregnant. We might be with child. We might soon be parents.* I was so overjoyed. It must have shown on my face,

as the doctor nodded, flashed me a most ginormous grin and walked out of the room.

Back in these days you had to order a blood test and usually go and give blood at a hospital. Today many doctor's offices can take the blood right there and, depending on the test even test it immediately. Back in 1993, however, we had to make an appointment.

The problem? It was Christmas Eve.

They told us they were going to rush the results and they would likely take a day. Christmas fell on a Saturday that year, meaning we weren't going to find out the results until the next business day—Monday, December 27th.

It was the most excruciating Christmas ever! We wanted to tell *everyone*, but knew there was a good chance this was a false reading and she might not be pregnant. We had no choice but to wait for the official results. It felt like we were holding our breath for four days, waiting to exhale on Monday.

To complicate the situation even more, my grandparents had made the 6+ hour drive up to spend Christmas with our family, planning to leave on Sunday. We had to convince them to stay without giving them a good reason why, because if it turned out Vicky wasn't pregnant, we didn't want to upset them. (Note: convincing someone to stay without a reason why is never easy.) In the end, I enlisted the help of my mother.

I told her what was happening and how we didn't want to say anything in case it wasn't good news, but we wanted them present in person if there *was* an announcement to make. I still don't know exactly what she told them, but they stayed.

On Monday, December 27th, my wife had to work while I was off and fidgeting at my parent's house, praying and waiting. My grandparents were a bit on edge, having been convinced to stay for not just the one day, but *two*, since we wouldn't find out until late afternoon. Every time the house phone rang my mother jumped right alongside me. When it wasn't Vicky, she was always quick to get whomever it was off of the phone ASAP.

Looking back, everyone probably knew what we were waiting for. The plan was for Vicky to get off work, find out the results, call me

with the results and then drive to my parent's house (about an hour from our apartment) and, if the news was good, we would announce it together.

I still vividly remember the call.

I stood in my parent's dining room where the phone was. I could barely contain myself as I braced for the result, but honestly, I was going to be super disappointed if we weren't pregnant. I held my breath as I got on the phone and heard Vicky's voice.

"I'm pregnant!"

Those were some of the sweetest words I'd ever heard, and coming from the one I loved was a very special moment for me. A smile the size of the Grand Canyon spread across my face. My mother walked over to the kitchen and saw the smile cross my face, which I quickly tried to hide. She let out a tiny gasp of joy as she attempted to conceal her own huge smile.

About an hour later, Vicky arrived and we announced to our entire family (*parents, brother, and grandparents*): **we were going to have a baby**. Everyone was excited for us. Of course, we weren't out of the woods just yet. Vicky had become pregnant, which was a miracle in itself. Now we had to work closely with the doctor to take this baby to term and deliver a happy healthy child. This meant constant monitoring by the doctor, as well as lots of sonograms, urine tests, blood work, and a bunch of other tests to ensure success. It was simultaneously a joyful and super stressful time.

If I thought I felt useless before, I *really* did during the entire first trimester. Vicky didn't have morning sickness or evening sickness, though. No, instead her body opted for the complete package of all-day sickness. It was so bad the doctor became concerned she wasn't getting enough nutrients for the baby and had her sucking on ice pops and eating as many pretzels as her stomach would allow.

He did mention to me once that it might be a result of the PCOD, but there was no way to be sure. For me this translated to my being totally and completely useless. Actually, there were a few times I was even *less* than useless, simply by being in the way.

I would try and help. I stroked her head or scratched her back, things which provided relief sometimes, but only made her feel worse

other times. The problem was there was no way to decipher whether my efforts would be welcome or rejected until I tried, so there was always a risk involved.

I found myself sitting in the living room praying her pain and discomfort would stop. Almost like clockwork, as soon as we entered the second trimester her sickness ended. It was as if a switch had been turned off. I was so extremely happy, I didn't question it, going with the flow.

When I talk to young fathers-to-be these days, I tell them they'd better soak up the second trimester, because it's the best thing ever. During the second trimester the baby begins to move, the heartbeat is strong, a sonogram can show you your child, and your wife is super, super happy. She has that glow pregnant woman get.

It's a magical time for her, and she begins to show and everyone is excited for her and the new life growing inside. A new life which came about all because of you — the Dad to be. You made her pregnant. You are the man. In fact, you're kind of a Superman.

While everyone's rubbing your wife's belly and laughing, other fathers are high-fiving you and patting you on the back, all while a growing smirk forms on their faces. Sure, you think it's because you had sex, but the reality is they know what's coming and how unprepared you are. So they still slap you and stand with you and grin, knowing you only have a few short months to suck up all this adulation. Soon enough the third trimester will hit, and then all bets will be off.

For Vicky the third trimester arrived with a roar. She could no longer get comfortable on our bed. None of her clothes fit. She suddenly looked at herself in the mirror and felt fat. Understand that the previous day she was the same size and glowing with a cute belly. That day had come and gone. Today it wasn't anything but fat.

And in her third trimester mind, because she was fat meant there was no possible way I could still be in love with her. This list went on and on and on. I could do nothing right. If I rubbed her it was too much. If I didn't rub her, it was because I didn't find her attractive. If I complimented her, I didn't mean it or I was just saying that because I was "stuck" being married. If I tried to help by carrying

things for her, I suddenly had no faith in her ability to be independent.

Ladies and gentlemen, it was a dark, dark time where I fondly reminisced the glory days of the second trimester. Still, I looked forward to the baby's arrival, a new life about to be added to our family. We thought we were doing okay, basically ready for what lie ahead of us. I can tell you, without a shadow of a doubt, we weren't close to being ready. We were on the other side of the *planet* from ready. Still, we continued to coast in our hopeful approach to the runway.

I was never a fan of Biology in High School, primarily because all the names were way too long and I was dyslexic. But I want to take a moment to define a couple of things for you so you can understand what was happening inside her. (*If you're a medical professional, feel free to skip ahead…*) Before a baby can be birthed naturally, there are a series of things the woman's body goes through toward the end of the pregnancy. All of these must be done before any pushing can happen (or at least before it's safe to push).

The first thing to know is the baby's due date is really a window of time. They give you a single date (like September 1st), but this really represents a window of about five weeks, starting three weeks before the due date and ending two weeks after. They'd like you to give birth during this window of time because it's ideal for all involved. Before three weeks is too early and the baby might not have fully developed. Too late, and there are issues for the mother.

Next important item is the baby has to "drop." The uterus holds and nurtures the baby at stomach level during the majority of the pregnancy. However, the baby has to get down to where it comes out before it can actually come out. This is the "drop," as the woman's body will maneuver the baby from the stomach area down into her hips and between her pelvis in preparation for the delivery of the baby through the birth canal. This has a funny measurement I don't fully understand, but I do know it's called "Zero Station" when the baby's in place for birth.

Another important thing to happen is the cervix (a fancy name for the cork holding the baby inside the woman) has to begin to open or

"dilate." This is measured in centimeters, and there are several key points along this stretching open. I don't know them all but I know a couple.

For example, they will typically not give you an epidural (a special kind of numbing drug given in the spine) if you're six centimeters dilated or greater. They will also not usually give it until you're at least two centimeters dilated. I'm unsure of the rest of the key points. Basically, the door has to open so the baby can come out.

The last thing also happens to the cervix (the cork) which will thin and soften or "efface" so the baby can come out. Effacement is measured in percent, and they are ideally looking for full, or 100%, effacement for birth.

To wrap this up, for a baby to be born naturally, the baby has to be at zero station, the cervix has to be ten centimeters dilated and the cervix has to be at one hundred percent effacement. Only *then* can the woman begin pushing the baby out of the birth canal. There are tons of other things that can or do happen around the pregnancy, including some really bad things, but these were the ones that I remembered the most.

Six weeks before our due date, Vicky and I were at the doctor's office and he discovered she was two centimeters dilated and around 15% effaced. The baby wasn't at zero station and there was great concern about it being too early. So the doctor ordered my wife to go on complete bedrest. She could go to the bathroom and to the living room to lay on the couch, and that was it. He wanted to at least get within three weeks of the due date to let the baby "cook" some more, because a premature baby can have a lot of issues he wanted us to avoid.

So Vicky went on strict bedrest, which she didn't really appreciate. This also interrupted our attending of Lamaze class —where they teach soon-to-be parents all about the delivery process. We started classes about two months before our due date, figuring we had plenty of time. Instead, we were on bedrest after just one class, unable to attend the rest. This freaked me out, but I knew God was in control and tried really hard to just be there for Vicky.

If you know Vicky, then you know she *really* does not like being

idle. She wasn't a big television watcher at the time, and it didn't help that we only had five channels for her to choose from, and definitely no on-demand or streaming options. Her choices were extremely limited, to put it mildly, and most days there was nothing on that she wanted to watch.

This meant her bedrest time was *driving her crazy*, and she would eagerly throw me in the backseat to take me along for the ride. I tried really hard to both help Vicky and remind her she had to keep laying down and resting. However, I had to go to work every day, which left Vicky alone several hours, laying there with essentially nothing to do.

Today, you have all of your streaming services and a ton of shows to watch or catch up on, and if that doesn't please you, there's an endless supply of movies. Back then, however, you had far less options. Daytime television consisted of soap operas and talk shows. To make things worse, I'd taken the doctor's concern for my wife's bed rest to heart. I had an image that if she moved too much, *BAM!* — the baby would suddenly drop out of her. (Give me some grace, it was my first child and I didn't know any better.) But it was on my mind *every single time* my wife decided to get up, so I was hyper-diligent about reminding her to lay back down.

Three long, tiring, drudging weeks clicked by at a snail's pace, but we managed to keep it together and not kill each other or *BAM!* — drop a baby into our living room. I was happy, blissfully thinking the hard part was over.

Boy, was I wrong.

We hadn't come *close* to the hard part.

On Tuesday, August 9th, 1994, we returned to our doctor's office. There we discovered my wife's body was now six centimeters dilated (*which meant they wouldn't give her an epidural*), the baby had dropped to zero station, and she was around thirty percent effaced. The doctor was super happy with us, and decided we were in the green zone and could start birthing a baby.

We were *beyond* excited.

The doctor ordered I take my wife to the mall, being indoors with ample air conditioning, and have her walk until her contractions started, aiming for five minutes apart at most. I was excited. *This* was

something I could do, something I could finally *succeed* at. Take my wife to the mall? Could do. We love the mall anyway. Take her for a walk. Easy peasy. I mean, how hard could that be, right? She'd already walked into the doctor's office. Get those contractions going, down to five minutes apart? Piece of cake.

We were off to the races.

But first, allow me to set the scene.

The mall wasn't very crowded, as this was the middle of the day. I also worked at the mall, so I was intimately familiar with how it was laid out. I parked the car, we entered the mall and began walking.

It was nice. We were window shopping, chatting with a few people who knew us about how we were going to have a baby soon and were walking it out. It was a great time, almost too good to be true.

And then it happened.

My wife felt something.

Immediately I began timing, because this must be a contraction, right? She stopped for a second with kind of an "oh my," and then it passed. Finished as fast as it had begun. *Well, that was easy*, I thought. *Why do they show people screaming in the movies during these things? That was just cute little hiccup. No sweat. This is going to be so easy.*

(Cue the ominous musical score here…)

We'd been walking for about a half hour when the first *real* contraction hit. Vicky suddenly stopped, doubled over and screamed. This wasn't a half-second "oh my," but lasted more than twenty seconds. The entire time I'm trying to keep her walking, of course, because "the doctor told me to keep her walking."

She wasn't having any of that. She was in pain and wanted to sit.

"Remember what the doctor said," I gently reminded her.

"I don't care."

I happily encouraged her how millions of women just like her had given birth that month, and soon she would too, because she was the strongest person I knew. This didn't necessarily inspire her with confidence or strength, but I suppose it managed to keep her going.

Once the contraction was over, I began the timer. Ten minutes

later the second hit. It was a touch worse, but we did our best to keep moving. The next one was slightly closer, and the pattern continued.

Now, I don't know if you've ever had to keep a screaming woman, writhing in obvious pain, walking in a semi-crowded public place, but let me just tell you: it's not easy. Not only did I have to deal with the anguish my wife was experiencing, but I also had to contend with onlookers who thought it was their job to inform me how cruel I was, "making this poor woman walk, and with child, no less." Some asked how I could be so barbaric, ignoring me when I explained it was "doctor's orders," and we were simply trying to get her contractions going.

Nothing I said made a difference. What was even more shocking was how I was being dressed down by older women, women who had presumably *had* children and should have known what was happening. Fortunately, there was a ray of hope. One of the ladies who worked in a store close to where I worked was also pregnant and had been in our Lamaze class. It wasn't her first child, and she was rooting us on. Every time we passed, even if there were people in her store, she would shout her encouragement to keep going. I can't tell you how encouraging that was for both of us. We almost wanted to speed up as we walked around, just to get back to her encouraging words.

Eight hours of walking later…

Vicky still wasn't at a point where the contractions were close enough to take her back to the hospital. It was almost seven in the evening, and all of my wife's amazing strength had left her. There was nothing left in the tank, and she told me we had to stop.

We went home, knowing the doctor was expecting her to be ready in a couple of hours in the delivery room. We felt it was safe to go home and rest, but it also made us wonder, after so many hours of physical exhaustion, what still lay ahead of us before we would see our baby.

I should note we'd decided to not discover the sex of our baby beforehand, something we did for all three of our children. We wanted those magical moments just after a child is born when the

doctor declares what we had. We didn't know the sex of any of our children, and let me tell you, those crucial moments of revelation are among the ones I will most cherish for all eternity.

So we didn't check the sex, which upset everyone in the extended family. They were convinced we knew but were just not telling anyone. *Why would anyone do that?* I thought. That'd just be cruel.

The next morning we got a call from the doctor's office, surprised they hadn't heard about a new delivery. Our doctor was concerned. He asked if we were still walking. I jokingly said, "Absolutely, I just toss Vicky a sandwich every now and then!" He got the joke. However, his orders were the same: get to the mall and walk and walk and *walk* until the contractions were under five minutes apart.

So we psyched ourselves up and headed back to the mall. Many of the same people who had scolded us the day before were there, so we received many of the same comments. However, our friend was *also* there, encouraging us once more. We also had one of my co-workers, Ingrid, who had kind of adopted Vicky and I, like a cool aunt. Ingrid was super supportive, totally cheering us on. After so much exhaustion and discouragement, it was really nice to have this level of support.

One lap of the mall, and we were in the target zone and off to the hospital!

We wish. Instead, we got a couple of hours in before we were finally under the five-minute mark. We told everyone we were on our way to the hospital and made our way to the car. Everything was going great. We raced five minutes down the road and entered the hospital… at which point Vicky mentions to me the contractions had stopped.

A flood of emotions washed over me. I *really* didn't want to go back to the mall and walk again. I was tired, Vicky was exhausted, and I was pretty sure neither of us could take another couple of hours of walking. Instead, we decided to go up to the labor and delivery floor and check in to let them know what was happening.

The nurses set us up in a room and called our doctor, who was quick to arrive as his office was connected to the hospital. Vicky's last contraction was at the mall and the doctor assessed the situation. He decided that instead of walking some more he was going to give Vicky

Pitocin, a drug to help kick things along. We were relieved, exhausted, excited, tired, and thinking we were totally ready for the arrival of our first born.

Remember the Lamaze class we attended one session of? Well, during the class you learn a lot of valuable information about what to expect, what drugs are available, what different tools might be used, what some of the terms are, and various ways to help you mitigate the pain — which doesn't work, in my opinion. One of the last things that class does is tour the labor and delivery floor of the hospital, showing the expectant parents what the room looks like so they aren't surprised.

Any guesses which night they happened to pick to tour the delivery floor?

That's right. The class we attended for all of one session was touring the labor floor *at the exact moment* Vicky was juiced up and feeling some major contractions at about two minutes apart. The class quickly looked in on us, but didn't stay long. Instead, they moved on to show the other parents-to-be an empty room.

Did I mention the drug Pitocin and how it works? The drug's designed to help the woman's body kickstart contractions. In my mind, this meant we would slowly have a mild contraction (one of the "oh my" ones) around every five minutes apart. Then over the course of, say, a few hours, slowly bring us up to speed at a contraction every two minutes.

I couldn't have been more wrong.

Instead, Pitocin takes you from zero to one hundred and sixty in a matter of *seconds*. The first contraction to hit after Vicky was dosed was a hard one. Let me pause here and let everyone who have not had a child or been in labor and delivery room when a child is on the way — you have *no idea* the level of excruciating pain a contraction will be.

Imagine the worst pain you've ever experienced and multiply that by a hundred. Then double it, and add four more, for good measure. Then double it *again*, and you'll begin to get close.

We were totally unprepared for the level of pain Vicky was experiencing. The thing about my wife is she's the strongest person that I know. She can bear anything, survive anything, and always finds a

way, never failing. She just doesn't know *how* to fail. This woman could have a semi-truck roll over her and she'd still get up and go to work. But that day she was suddenly having trouble breathing because of how intense the pain was.

We arrived at the hospital around noon, but it was probably around 1pm that the Pitocin started working. It took several hours (eight?) before my wife's body was ready. Remember, she came in at six centimeters dilated, with only four to go. She wasn't quite half effaced and the baby had dropped. All indicators in my mind pointed to a quick delivery.

Not at all.

However, the worst part for me was yet to come.

Tuesday, August 9th, the day before, we had a sonogram done to see how our child was doing. Everything was perfect. The baby was where it was supposed to be and ready to see the world, my wife was ready to see the child who had been growing inside her, and I was ready to move to the next phase of this journey. Back at the hospital, doctor declared everything was right and it was time to push.

This is where the woman will literally push the baby out of her uterus through the birth canal into the world. For a first-time birth, it can take a long time. An hour and half later the baby crowned, meaning the top of the head was visible, and he was called back in the room. The nurses stationed themselves around the bed as the doctor took command and began giving orders.

It was all flowing in a rhythm and soon we would see our baby. Then the doctor's face dropped. He uttered something I couldn't make out, and the whole room became electrified, everyone shifting into crisis mode. The nurse closest to me shoved me out of the way and literally hopped up on top of my wife's stomach. She was doing something that I couldn't make out. The doctor, usually full of joy and smiling and cracking jokes, had a stern and serious look on his face.

I knew then something was wrong.

Something was very wrong.

Understand me when I say I don't mean to diminish the journey my wife was in any way. But when I was shoved back out of the way, I

knew something serious was happening. I didn't know what, but my mind was filling in the blanks. I imagined a vivid scene, witnessing the loss of both my coming child and my wife. On top of that was the horror that there was absolutely nothing I could do. I couldn't fix something or break something or cut something or mend something or shout something or do a blessed thing.

All I could do was stand there and watch. Watch and be completely useless. It seemed like an eternity before the nurse climbed down off my wife, and I died a thousands deaths in that moment of helplessness.

What happened was our baby decided it wasn't comfortable, turning suddenly to face *sideways*. Why is this an issue? In the ideal setting, the baby will be face down as the woman lays upright giving birth. This is to allow for quick evacuation of any of the amniotic fluid in the baby just a little bit before keeping it alive. This has to be done quickly, because at the moment of birth the baby isn't breathing, so someone has to open the passageways for the baby to breath. This is why doctors want to hear the baby cry, to know they were able get air into their lungs and draw a full breath.

However, there is a second reason a baby's ideal delivery is face down, and that's all about the shoulders. The baby's shoulders are left to right, spanning the woman's body, positioned perfectly to pass through the pelvis bones and come into the word. If the baby is turned to the left or right, at a certain point the shoulders will not be able to pass through the pelvis and the baby will become stuck. When this happens, the doctor will quickly notify a trained nurse to get on top of the woman and massage her belly, forcing the baby's shoulders into the *correct* position and turning it so it can be born.

This is what happened to our child, why I was pushed out of the way. They had mere minutes to get the baby turned, birthed, and the airways cleared to avoid any potential brain damage. This is why everyone became so serious, so fast. This wasn't normal, and I had no training about what needed to happen and they certainly didn't have time to explain it to me. After it was over, I was thankful they knew what they were doing.

With the crisis averted and the nurse climbing back down, the

focus shifted back to pushing. The doctor called me over to help with the remainder of the birth. I got to watch the miracle of life as it was happening. I was truly awe-inspiring, breathtaking. God totally knew what He was doing when He allowed us to bring new life into this world. I know it was longer, but it really only felt like two pushes before our baby was out and laying on the table.

It was at this point that the doctor called me over. He looked down at our beautiful baby girl and then up at me. "This is why I do what I do!" he said, handing me a pair of scissors and asking if I would cut the cord. I was about to ask what that meant when he held up the umbilical cord, motioning to where I should cut.

Honestly, we thought we were having a boy, only because the Aquilone's have a strong history of birthing boys. Going back several generations, the ratio was something like nine out of every ten were boys. So the odds were in strong favor of our having a boy, and our doctor had overheard us talking about this. When our daughter arrived and both the doctor and I could see it was clearly *not* a boy, we suddenly looked up at each other in synchronized, shocked surprise. I was totally taken aback. I had a daughter! And I couldn't have been more excited about it. But the initial hesitation and the looks on our faces alarmed Vicky.

"What is the matter?" she asked.

The doctor turned to her, grinning. "It's a girl!"

You could have heard a pin drop.

Once we cut the cord, the nurses started shouting out some numbers. They briefly laid our baby girl on Vicky's chest so she was able to see her new daughter. There's nothing like the moment when the doctor announces "It's a girl!", but I tell you, there what's even more precious is when a woman who's just given birth looks into the face of her new born child.

We weren't out of the woods yet, however. The nurses took our daughter to be weighed and had shouted out a number I would later learn was an APGAR — a rating on the health of the baby, based on some key checks. This brought renewed concern into the room, and they immediately took our baby out.

I don't remember exactly what they said when they were taking

her, but we got the impression they were going to clean her up and bring her back. Only…that didn't happen. At some point, they returned to tell us our baby had a bad case of jaundice, and literally needed to be "cooked" a little longer under ultraviolet lights. I had no idea what this was about, and they didn't exactly do a great job of explaining it to us. Fortunately, one of our friends from church was a pediatrician, and soon explained what jaundice was.

She told us it wasn't unusual for babies to have jaundice, and that it was almost expected with early births. I wish I could tell you her words made me feel better, but they didn't. Especially when going down and looking through the glass at my daughter, set off to the side from other kids, isolated in a plastic tube with lights over her. We were only allowed to take her out for feedings, and even then it wasn't nearly long enough.

It was grueling, looking at her under those lights. Especially when she would be crying. I wanted to punch some of the nurses for not picking her up or letting us hold her when she cried. Eventually the jaundice went away, though, and after several days my wife was discharged and we were finally able to take our baby home.

Katherine "Katie" Marie.

Named after my great uncle's wife and both of our grandmothers. It was a long journey to see her become part of our lives, and she was and remains one of the most amazing blessings in my life. I'm so proud of my daughter and the woman she's become. Super thankful to God that He had a different plan for us, sending us this doctor to help make it happen.

This stone is in my altar because it taught me how *nothing* is ever impossible with God. He'd used an amazing doctor to help navigate us through the twists and turns to the final blessing God had ordained to give us. Any other doctor would have probably just written us off. In fact, over the years there have been other doctors who can't believe we even have children. Yet God is good, and this stone reminds me of it all the time. It also reminds me to stay resolutely focused on what God says to us, listening to His voice and ignoring all others. Because blessing comes from listening and following what God says.

GOBBLE, GOBBLE, GOBBLE...GOBBLE

'For thus says the Lord God of Israel, 'The bowl of flour shall not be exhausted, nor shall the jar of oil be empty, until the day that the Lord sends rain on the face of the earth.' So she went and did according to the word of Elijah, and she and he and her household ate for many days.'
- 1 Kings 17:14-15

2005 was a year that rocked my world — and especially my view on my finances. Up until that point I had come to believe God wasn't in the mix when it came to giving to a church or ministry. Back when I was around seven or eight, I found my grandfather's offering envelopes at his house. The church had them preprinted, complete with a specific amount on them. As a kid, I concluded the church he attended had imposed or forced him to give that amount — or else. This was further strengthened by some of the stories (which I later learned were just that, *stories*) my father would tell me about the church and their forcing our Italian family to give large amounts of money — or else we wouldn't be allowed to be members *or* blessed.

Today, I recognize the envelopes were because he had given a commitment to the church with the amount already set, so he couldn't

rationalize himself out of giving in the future (and through which, I might point out, he was super, super blessed for). So it was somewhat of an understatement to say my view of giving and tithing was skewed.

During the summer of 2005, God spoke to me about giving a large amount, and when I followed through He blessed me amazingly from it. It was uncomfortable and exhilarating, shaking my foundational ideas of money, of God and giving. I was happy and surprised. Excited and perpetually perplexed. What I had experienced didn't connect with what I'd grown to believe. Still, God wasn't done with me yet.

On the Sunday before Thanksgiving 2005, I was struggling. Since early summer I'd been giving faithfully, but my heart wasn't really into it. I was doing it because God had blessed me before, but I felt if I stopped the blessings would also stop, as if God would somehow stop loving me. (This isn't true, of course, but that's how I felt.) However, leading up to this Sunday I'd been working as a contractor, which meant when the money for contractors waned, the amount of hours I could work was reduced.

I was working for a defense contractor company who went by a calendar year, meaning they wound down their budgets heading into December. This meant as we got closer and close to the end of the year, I worked less and less hours and made less and less money. In the six weeks leading up to the Sunday before Thanksgiving, I'd worked the equivalent of eight days (if I worked as a full-time employee, it would have been 30 days). This all meant very little money was coming in so little that we didn't have enough to pay any bills or feed our family.

Back to Sunday morning before Thanksgiving. I was sitting on the edge of my bed, arguing with the Lord. The topic? Tithing. I held in my hand the tithe check, representing the remaining money in our account after paying for water and utilities, and still we were negative. I felt God was disconnecting with us and not blessing or loving us anymore, which didn't make sense because up to this check I had been tithing regularly. I was doing exactly what I felt God wanted me to do!

So there I sat, arguing. The last thing I told God before I left for

church was, "God I'm going to go to church today and hand in my tithe check. I'm not going to say a word about where we are or our struggles. If you want me to continue to tithe, then you'll have to put it on someone else's heart to reach out to me!"

Pfft. As if God is moved or threatened by ultimatums. But gave God one, right then and there. I thought about King Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel, chapter 2, when he wouldn't share his dream but demanded an interpretation. I wanted to see God move, not just someone's heartfelt compassion or pity. I didn't want to be deceived by kind hearts and words, but really wanted to see the heart of God. So I made this statement to God and headed to church.

True to my word, I didn't tell anyone about the war going on in my mind or the struggle in our finances. Instead, I went to church like nothing was wrong and handed in my check. The only person who knew was Vicky. Interestingly, while I didn't share my thoughts with her, she wasn't telling anyone, either. While I know there are a lot of accounts of people bargaining with God or making deals with God, do you really want to know what I was doing?

It was all about pride.

True, I *did* want to see the heart of God, but a large part of me didn't want others to see I couldn't support my own family, financially. I didn't want to risk others looking down on me. I was afraid they would have seen me as weak, and where I grew up that was unacceptable. So instead of relying on God, I was really relying on preserving my pride.

This irrational and unsupported fear was just plain poppycock. Had we shared, our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ would likely have prayed for us and stood alongside us to see what God was going to do. Praise God, He was (and is) bigger than my pride.

At the end of church after I'd already handed in my tithe, the pastor came over to me. "Could you use a turkey?" he asked me, then went on to explain how the church had purchased some turkeys to give out, but (for some reason that I do not remember) they didn't get to give them away as intended.

Immediately I told him yes, but didn't tell him anything more. He then informed me that someone would be in touch with me later in

the day. I waited the rest of the day at home, but no one called. I was disappointed, but chalked it up to either the pastor forgetting or God giving it to someone else in need.

Tuesday evening, and my family and I sat down to literally eat the last meal — the last bit of food we had left. My wife and I exchanged knowing glances, but there wasn't anything else we could do. When we were done eating that night, there was going to be no food left in the house.

Now, you might be thinking "Aren't there food shelves or social services in your area?" Yes, there are… but we made too much money and hadn't gone long enough without a regular income for them to help, so we were no longer eligible. Boggles the mind, sure, but that's where we were at with that.

As for food shelves, you could only go once a week and we had already gone that week to get the food we had. We could go again on Saturday, but that would have left Wednesday through Friday with empty cupboards and stomachs. We could have reached out and asked for help and food from people we knew, but it would have required humility, and I struggled with that. I might have gotten there, come Wednesday morning, but God had something else in mind.

As I sat there with my three amazing kids, tears came to my eyes. I had to choke them back, because the kids couldn't see how Mom and Dad were struggling. Why not? Pride again. I concluded there were some things kids should not be burdened or concerned about. However, they could have been standing with us in prayer that God would provide, because we *were* being obedient. They could have been involved in helping to raise our faith as we walked this out, because the faith of child just believes. I'd let pride rob myself of their support, while simultaneously robbing them of the blessing and encouragement through answered prayer.

As we finished up dinner, the phone rang. It was Hector, the church drummer. After introducing himself, he said pastor had talked to him about getting us a turkey on Sunday and he had completely forgotten about it. "You still want that turkey?" he asked.

"Absolutely," I said.

Then he said something that floored me, words I'll never forget. "Do you by chance want *three* turkeys?"

I'd been trying to figure out how far a single turkey could last when he'd offered the first one. My jaw dropped, and Vicky asked what was wrong while I was motioning to her to wait. I told him that we could, indeed, use three turkeys, and agreed to meet him at the church in a half hour. I put the phone down and quickly shared what Hector had said before racing out the door.

When I arrived at church, Hector was there with his truck open. At this point, I was so humbled by God and His divine providence that I blurted out our situation and how he was a direct answer to prayer, an instrument of God. He teared up, then shared how they came about having three turkeys.

"My wife doesn't like turkey," he said. "But every time she went to _____ and spent $50, they gave her a free turkey. She said God told her someone would need it, so she just kept grabbing them." He shrugged. "So we had these three turkeys in our freezer and Thanksgiving was just a few days away when pastor talked to us about giving one to you. When we were on the phone, I just felt led to ask if you wanted all three."

We hugged and I thanked him profusely because the smallest — the *SMALLEST* — turkey was *twenty-six pounds*.

You read that right. **26 pounds.** The *smallest*.

I drove home praising God the entire time… but He wasn't done with me yet.

When I arrived home Vicky met me at the car to carry in the turkeys. "You are never gonna believe what happened," she said.

"Wait, what?" I was still wrapping my head around what just happened. She continued. While I was gone, a lady from our church who worked for a local television ministry called. They had turkeys to give out to needy families and God put us on her heart, so she was calling to ask if she could come over and drop it off.

She didn't just drop off a turkey, however — she dropped off an entire thanksgiving dinner, complete with all the fixings and desserts and everything, each item in abundance. We had literally gone from empty cupboards to overflowing in less than an hour! We ended up

with four turkeys and a ton of sides, enough to easily last the five of us until my next paycheck. We had turkey, turkey sandwiches, turkey and gravy over biscuits, and so much more. We never had so much turkey in our lives, and I was thankful for every single bite.

That night I thanked God beyond words, sitting there weeping and worshipping in awe of Him. I also made the commitment that I would always tithe and I would give when and where He told me to, and He has never let me down. We have never been without a roof over our heads and food in our cupboards. There were still times that looked bleak, of course, but God has always come through.

Thankfully, God continued to work on my pride issues. I'm not sure I've completely won the war yet, but I win far more battles now than I did before this miracle happened.

This is a sizable stone in my altar, because it constantly reminds us if we follow what God says about our money and tithe, He will never let us go without. He will literally open the windows of heaven and fill our cupboards of need — sometimes within the hour. I'm so thankful to God for His amazing blessings.

JAMES AND THE SUV

'The angel of the Lord encamps
around those who fear Him, and rescues them.'
- Psalms 34:7

Roughly in the summer of 2006, we were serving at a church located in an L-shaped strip mall. It was in the corner of a shopping center, surrounded by several other businesses, most of which weren't open on Sunday. One that was open on Sundays, however, was a donut shop. Normally, this donut place would be closed by the time service was over. However, the shop would wisely choose to stay open late, selling half-priced donuts to the churchgoers.

I don't need to tell you how much kids love donuts, *especially* mine. They *loved* going and getting donuts after church. Since it was within the same shopping center, coupled with the fact Katie was almost ten years old, we often let her escort her sister and brother down to get a donut or two.

As we already established, God loves my son James and has helped to keep him from harm (and save his life) on more than one occasion (see Here Comes Blessing Number 3 and Falling Angel). James wasn't

quite four years old, loved church and then going with his sisters to get some donuts. The idea for us was the snack would help to tide our children over, because at the time we were bringing several other children to church with us, and due to our limited car size had to make multiple trips. The donut helped the kids (mostly James who didn't fully understand yet) hold out until we were all home and had lunch together.

So it was a normal Sunday, and we handed the kids some money to head down and have their weekly donut fix. The church was positioned at an angle, with the lobby spanning the storefront, looking out onto the parking lot. From there we could see the donut shop, although some cars obscured the exact path and entrance, allowing us to be able to still keep tabs on our kids as they made the track down and back.

This particular Sunday the kids went on their way and Vicky and I were in the lobby talking with other members of the church, both us oblivious to what was about to happen.

I'm not sure if I'd looked down at something like a bulletin or maybe my shoes, but when my gaze returned upright and I looked out at the parking lot, I saw a parent's worst nightmare — *definitely one of my worst nightmares*! James had darted out between two cars, *straight into the parking lot*. His racing out was certainly a disconcerting issue, and one we would have disciplined him for later, but there was a much more pressing issue unfolding. Careening around the corner of the building at high speed, in an obvious effort to bypass the light at the corner, an SUV was gunning it, heading directly for James.

I've heard people say when traumatic events occur, everything slows down, as if you're stuck in a movie, watching all the events unfold with a feeling of helplessness and dread. This was one of the moments.

I watched James as he slowly bounced across the parking lot, not a care in the world. I saw the SUV peeling its tires, horrified as it lined up to hit my son, like a bowling ball finding its mark and taking out that single remaining pin.

I was completely frozen. There was nothing I could do but watch what would most likely be the death of my only son. I remember my

mind screaming at my body, "MOVE!" while nothing happened. I wanted to do something — *anything* — to save my son, but this truck was way too close and moving far too fast. I had no chance of even getting through the church doors in time, let alone into the parking lot.

At this point, tears started racing down my face as the realization slapped me hard: I was about to lose my son. And then my horrific nightmare doubled. Racing out from the front of the donut shop shot Katie. She was determined to save her little brother, and with no thought for her own safety darted toward him. (It's also possible she didn't want to hear from Mom and Dad the "How could you let this happen?" inquisitions later.)

Whatever the reason, I watched as she ran out to catch her brother and save him from the monster vehicle rapidly bearing down on his position. Sensing the truck was too close to get away, she heroically wrapped herself around him, almost completely enveloping him, back to the SUV, closing her eyes and preparing for impact.

"NO!" I wanted to scream.

The pastor's wife beat me to it, and let out an extremely loud gasp, causing everyone in the lobby to simultaneously look into the parking lot. And that's when God decided this had gone far enough.

I don't know if it was one angel or twelve, or the fist of God himself, but the truck didn't hit my children. We all watched as the SUV abruptly stopped its forward movement, pivoting upward on the front wheels, kicking the back end into the air behind it. From my vantage point, it looked as if the vehicle went completely vertical. Picture a Hulk sized angel, suddenly and violently smashing both hands down on the front of the hood, the back end flipping up as the front comes to an immediate halt. The SUV's rear portion lifted into the air before plopping back down to the ground.

My two babies were completely unharmed.

The slow motion stopped, and I ran outside and grabbed my children, giving them the biggest hugs I think I've ever given them. Vicky was right behind me with her series of hugs, as the people in the lobby poured out into the parking lot. It was at this point the lady driver of the SUV got out of the vehicle.

She looked in shock and then shocked everyone present when she exclaimed, "I never saw them! I never took my foot off the gas! I've no idea how my truck just stopped!"

She had never let off of the gas!

The only way that vehicle stopped that day was by the miraculous hand of God, supernaturally shielding our children. Thank you, God!!

This is a huge stone in my altar, showing me the miraculous lengths God is willing to go to in order to protect my family. I'm forever thankful to God for this day. I can't tell you why God is so good to any of us, because we certainly do not deserve it, but He is amazingly, awesomely good. Praise God.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



July 12, 1992, an extremely cocky and overly arrogant twenty-two-year-old man entered a small church in upstate New York, utterly unaware his entire life was about to change. Taking his seat, he crossed his arms and sighed skeptically. As the preacher began, a mysterious heaviness entered the room, pressing harder and harder on the man's soul. In less than an hour, he was both broken and restored as he was introduced to Jesus Christ, and from that moment on the man's life has never been the same.

In the thirty plus years that followed, Patrick Aquilone has consistently pledged himself to serve God with all his heart. He's had the privilege of helping plant two churches, leading small and large groups in teaching the Word, overseeing children's ministry, mentoring younger Christians, and pouring his life into many fledgling marriages to help resuscitate them. His heart is to see lives transformed through the amazing power of God.

He earned a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering from Rutgers University and works by day as a software developer. While being born in New Jersey and having met Jesus in New York, Patrick calls the great state of Texas his home, loving both the weather and the people.

Patrick has been married to his wife of thirty-three years and has raised three amazing young adults. In his spare time, Patrick is a perpetual space nerd and scifi geek. He devours all media related to the space race and especially science fiction. His favorite pastime is sitting around a table with friends and family playing board and card game.


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