



Sunday July 20, 2014

# ZWTF

Zapping-you Whenever Thoughts Flow

Volume 3, Issue 26

## Forward, Not Back

God's paths are hard, but comfort zones are ultimately harder.

**"In faith died all these, not being requited with the promises, but perceiving them ahead and saluting them, and avowing that they are strangers and expatriates on the earth. For those who are saying such things are disclosing that they are seeking for a country of their own. And, if, indeed, they remembered that from which they came out, they might have had occasion to go back. Yet now they are craving a better, that is a celestial; wherefore God is not ashamed of them, to be invoked as their God, for He makes ready for them a city."**

—Hebrews 11:13-16

**"I am pursuing, if I may be grasping also that for which I was grasped also by Christ Jesus. Brethren, not as yet am I reckoning myself to have grasped, yet one thing—forgetting, indeed, those things which are behind, yet stretching out to those in front—toward the goal am I pursuing for the prize of God's calling above in Christ Jesus. Whoever, then, are mature, may be disposed to this."**

—Philippians 3:12-15

**"Now a different one also said, 'I shall be following Thee, Lord! Yet first permit me to take leave of those in my home. Yet Jesus said to him, 'No one, putting forth his hand on a plow and looking behind, is fit in the kingdom of God.'"**

—Luke 9:61-62

**"The sun, it came forth over the earth when Lot, he came to Zoar. Then Yahweh, He caused sulphur to rain on Sodom and on Gomorrah,**

**and the fire from Yahweh from the heavens. Thus He overturned these cities and the entire basin and all those dwelling in the cities, and everything sprouting from the ground. Yet his wife looked back from behind him, and she became a monument of salt."**

—Genesis 19:23-26

### CHECK OUT THE NOW

**I**n Scripture, returning to where we've been—even though God took us there as well as here—is rarely recommended. God is calling us ever forward. It's not that we don't have good memories of the past. We do; but the good is mixed with the bad. Bad memories can cripple our appreciation of the present. Even good memories are often bittersweet because they're gone. God has



the cure for both the good and the bad of yesterday: look ahead to when we will be with Him, even while imbibing every scent of the present.

I am a champion of living for today. I am in good company, as our Lord recommended this course: "Take no thought for tomorrow," He said. Animals already know this. We often pity animals, but in many ways they suffer less than we. They neither worry about the past, nor fret

over the future. All they know is that they hunger and thirst and need a place to rest. Domesticated animals seek love. Jesus discouraged crystal ball gazing because it engenders worry. Certainly we are to anticipate His return and our own resurrection to immortality. We are to think upon the things He has guaranteed, but not upon all the bad or good things that *might* happen to us but probably won't.

Fear of the future paralyzes us. Our second-worst enemy is regurgitating the past. The past tasted bad the first time; the twentieth re-working of it is never an improvement. When it comes to the past, we are cows with four-part stomachs. We barf up foul-tasting memories and chew them until our jaws drop off. No one celebrates cows for their intelligence. The past is over and the future—with the exception of our coming



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glorification—is unknown. The Scriptural course belonging to peace lives right here, where God has set us for the day. From this secure camp, we can look ahead with confidence to where He has promised to deliver us.

Of all the terrible things we're able to imagine about tomorrow, only a small percentage of them will happen. The odds are overwhelmingly in favor of none of

them happening. As prognosticators, we suck. Even the bad things that we think will happen—and that do happen—never happen according to our grim blueprint. We may dread a hospital visit, but cannot anticipate the person there who will alter our lives for the better. Same with so-called good events. The wedding we've so meticulously choreographed comes to pass, but never in accord with the formula: the groom blows his lines; the bride trips over the runner; the ring-bearer wets his pants. So many unforeseen arrangements disrupt our scheming that we may as well cast our plans into God's lap and watch the circus.

### FAUXTOGAPHS

We can scrutinize our lives away—even the present—and fail to see what's truly happening. I used to take photographs all the time. Now I consistently travel without my camera. When someone tells me in the midst of a magical moment: “You should take a picture,” I always point to my head and say, “I just did.” We are too bent, I think, on artificially preserving memories. Let these memories either hang on or go away of their own accord. Why hold a memory hostage when some new thing wants all of our concentration?

### NEW THINGS

God is always calling us to walk through some miraculously-dry Red Sea bed, across a river Jordan to a promised paradise, up a mountain to where we will see Christ, or down into a hot, sparsely-populated valley where friends seem as rare as water. None of these great things are perfect, and none of the hard things come without mercies. You may think that the Israelites had jolly good fun crossing the rocky bed of the Red Sea, with the water standing up on either side of them. I doubt it. On the one hand, it was surely a thrill seeing water behave that way. On the other hand, the Egyptian army was hot on their heels. That figures. See? Something always screws up the “perfect” moment. Sorry to be a downer, but realism trumps misguided expectations. In the final analysis, “the substance of now” comforts. That both good things and bad come accessorized with their opposites keeps us relatively even and awaiting God's next move. Our highs aren't so high, and our lows are subject to happy modifications.

Moses ascended Sinai to meet God. Sounds good, right? Yes—if you can ignore the thunder, lightening, and scary angels buzzing your head. God invited Israel into a land dripping with milk, honey, and volleyball-sized

grapes. Naturally, there was a problem: the inhabitants of that land were nine feet tall and ill-disposed to invading hordes of God-fearers. Israel dreaded the Sinai desert, but there God provided them miraculous food and drink, while impressively extending the warranties on their clothing and footwear.

### PAUL GETS IT RIGHT

In Philippians 3:12-15, Paul speaks of pursuing that for which he was called. To do this, he must “forget, indeed, those things which are behind.” These behind things are both good and bad. Behind may have been fond memories of family—mother’s garden, father’s bakery, a childhood sweetheart. But for Paul, the past was also potentially a living hell. The Pharisee Saul persecuted the followers of Christ. He raided family homes, separated parents from children, and sentenced people to death. He supervised brutal scourgings. Startlingly, it is this same man who, in 2 Timothy 1:3, writes, “Grateful am I to God, to Whom I am offering divine service from my ancestors with a clear conscience.” How could this former butcher’s conscience be clear? It should be mostly cloudy with a one-hundred percent chance of precipitation. He was forgetting, indeed, those things which were behind. Paul grasped justification by faith. He believed what God told him about his newness in Christ. Paul refused to look in his rear-view mirror, preferring rather to see his glorious self reflected in God’s eyes. This is the rare, God-given ability to walk by faith and not by perception (2 Corinthians 5:7). It is the key to happiness in this life. Here are the practical results of such a disposition:

- ▶ You will ignore the bad stuff that has happened to you.
- ▶ You will stop worrying about the bad stuff that *could* happen to you.
- ▶ You will contemplate the promises of glory that God has given you.

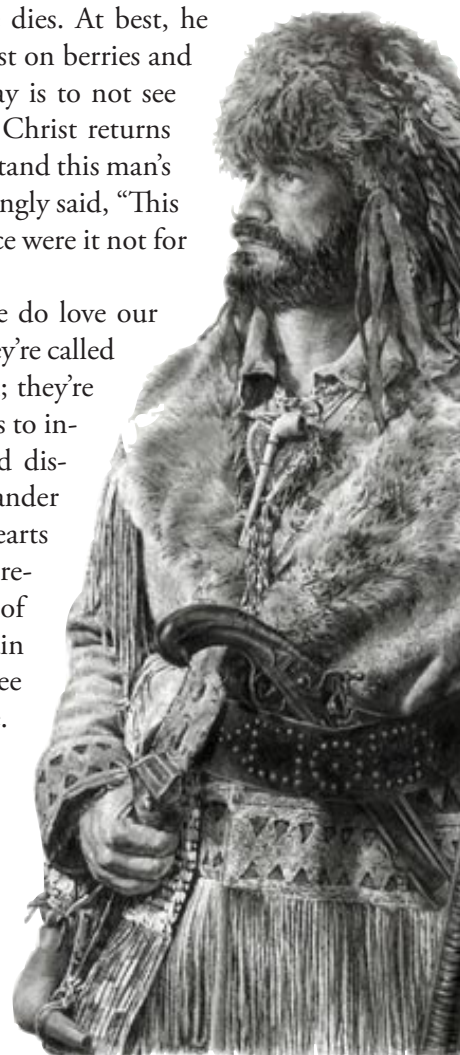
Am I able to do all three of these things all the time? No. I am rarely able to assemble any two of these marvels simultaneously. If I were ever able to execute the triple-play, I’m actually afraid of how good I might feel. I confess to you: there is some strange thing in me that resists complete happiness. Is it that I don’t trust any happiness short of immortality? Perhaps. Am I too cynical? Too damaged by past hurts? I don’t know. The cor-

ollary to resisting bliss is inviting misery. I don’t actively do this, but human beings do enjoy fondling their miserable little ruts. At least these ruts are safe and known; they’re *our* miserable little ruts. The quest for happiness is laden with pitfalls. How could such happiness—even if it existed—last? I often tell myself: *it is better to be happy and lose than never to be happy at all*. I sometimes don’t listen to myself. When I do listen, I’m the better for it. This is my point. By following God’s paths, we will always be happier than if we did nothing. Doing nothing may be safer, but it’s never better. “Playing it safe” is actually one of the riskiest things a person can do. Shall we appear before God having squandered His gifts? Having doubted His provision? Having chosen sight over faith? Having stiff-armed so many grand adventures? Having lived in fear all of our lives?

### BERRIES BUT NO BALLS

A friend of mine is so depressed that he’s considering castrating himself, retreating into a wilderness, and refusing to eat until he dies. At best, he will live in a cabin and subsist on berries and squirrels. His plan either way is to not see another human being until Christ returns to snatch him away. I understand this man’s motivation. I have often jokingly said, “This world would be a decent place were it not for all the humans.”

Speaking of humans, we do love our comfort zones, don’t we? They’re called “comfort zones” for a reason; they’re comfortable. To play it safe is to insulate oneself from hurt and discomfort. As soon as we wander outside of ourselves with hearts exposed, we risk pain, loss, rejection. Simply walking out of whatever four walls contain us guarantees some degree of humiliation and failure. “Nothing ventured, nothing gained” is true. “Nothing risked, nothing lost” is also true. This latter saying, however, assumes an immature grasp of loss, as if crippling fear and a complete lack of faith in God could ever





be a bankable asset. I say, it is better to live. I say, it is better to risk. My exhortation to you as well as to myself is: Exercise faith. Use it or lose it.

### THE HILLS ARE ALIVE, THE ABBEY IS DEAD

In *The Sound of Music*, Maria fears her attraction to Captain Von Trapp. To escape it and avoid the risk of hurt, she returns to a comfort zone: the abbey. Maria didn't much care for the abbey during her tenure there, but now prefers it to the potential pitfalls of falling in love. The Mother Abbess, you will recall, quickly discerns the motive behind Maria's return and says, "Maria, these walls were not meant to shut out problems. You have to face them. You have to live the life you were born to live."

I can't believe I'm saying this about a nun, but the Mother Abbess spoke wisdom there. There is a life we were born to live. I think each of us knows what life that is. If we don't know it, we strongly suspect it. It will come with problems, yes. But everything comes with

problems. Even doing nothing comes with problems. Stop trying to avoid problems; you can't. It is fear that keeps us from walking into our true life. It is fear that keeps us entrenched in our ruts where we are safely miserable. It is fear that keeps us within our well-worn zones of "safety." I repeat: Playing it safe is anything but safe.

We are not judged at the dais of Christ, but our lives will be flashed before us there. In a flash of divine scrutiny, we will be either rewarded, or suffer loss. The fire will be testing each one's work (1 Corinthians 3:13). What will God say when we return His talent, having buried it? We will be saved, "yet thus, as through fire" (1 Corinthians 3:15). What will we say to *Him*? "Lord, I knew that you were a hard man" (Matthew 25:24). *I won't be saying this. I'll be saying, "I knew you'd love it, Lord, so I chose the path of faith and risked everything. You gave me balls, so I kept them and used them to live boldly and with vigor. I lived like a man. I trusted You, so I went for it. Not all of it was easy, but all of it was richer. I learned so much about You, and about myself. I grew, Lord."*

When little is ventured, then little is gained. When all is risked, however, then mountain vistas appear out of the mists, granting us visions of God. And what do you know—He's smiling.

### "MY FAITH IS IMPERFECT"

In Mark chapter nine, a demon-possessed boy is brought before Christ. Jesus asks the boy's father how long his son had been that way. The man answers, "From a little boy," then adds, "If Thou art in any way able, help us, having compassion on us" (Mark 9:42). Jesus says, "Why the if? You are able to believe. All is possible to him who is believing" (Mark 9:23). The boy's father is then moved to tears and says, "I am believing! Help my unbelief!" (verse 24).

I love this. The father admits to imperfect faith. He's a walking contradiction. He believes, but he doesn't. What shocks me is that he is honest enough to admit it. For Christ, it is good enough. Jesus understands humanity. Such honesty was no doubt refreshing to Him. Straight-away, Jesus heals his son.

Do you have imperfect faith? Good enough.

Many of us have been told in organized religion that God cannot act on anything except our perfect faith. His miracles wait for us to perfect ourselves, we are told. Poor God. He must be looking at His watch a lot, waiting for us. Yet this passage from Matthew chapter nine disproves yet another faithless Christian proposition. Only One has



perfect faith, and that is the Lord Jesus Christ. In Matthew nine, He is the One—not the father—Who worked the miracle.

Announce your weakness and imperfection to God, and see what He does. He's gonna love it.

### THE NO-FAITHS OF ISRAEL

One cannot exactly call the faith of Israel in the wilderness imperfect. Rather, it was non-existent. Israel is the poster child for faithlessness.

God called Israel to a sweet deliverance that would require faith. At first, this engaged Israel's fantasies. Israel hated their Egyptian captors. They longed to breathe free air. Pause here for a moment and consider whatever God is calling you to. You love the concept of freedom; but what about the reality? There are many things that are exciting or even exhilarating to think about—but *only* think about. What is keeping you from turning thoughts into action? I say it's doubt. It's the same doubt that sunk Peter as he walked across the sea of Galilee. As soon as Peter focused on his circumstances rather than Christ, down he went.

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jump. Jump off the cliff, and you'll build wings on the way down. You will. Reasonable fear suddenly turns ordinary citizens into creative geniuses and paragons of strength.

If you have not yet left your personal Egypt, gird up your loins and look to the God Who is with you by day and by night. The Creator of the universe never sleeps. Walk through this gate and out into the wilderness. Walk like you mean it. Fake it until you make it. There is a Promised Land ahead, flowing with really good things. Your enemies are nine feet tall, yes, but God has promised to conquer them. Vengeance is His, not yours. You need only step forward with the sword of the spirit (the Word of God), in hand (Ephesians 6:17). Sandal yourself with the evangel of peace, and never forget that God looks upon

You don't need perfect faith. You are allowed to harbor doubts. Feel free to admit these doubts to God. He won't be flabbergasted. He's seen it all, don't you think? You won't shock him. When the balance finally tips in favor of faith, even if by a single percent (49% doubt/51% faith), then

you as righteous. How can you lose?

The only way you can get from here to there is to vacate your current location. Leave the dull, dim place of slavery/misery. This will require bravery. This bravery, you do not have. Admit to God how frightened you are. Once you've done that, set your face ahead. Imperfect faith is good enough for Him. Even fear is good enough when it's cast upon Him. Cast it upon Him, then watch the circus.

You begin this adventure with a single step—no more.

### ONE PUSH OF THE PEDAL

You know the famous saying: “A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.” I remember repeating this phrase to myself while sitting in a hotel room in Los Angeles in June, 1980. I was facing a transcontinental bicycle trip to Boston. Every time I pondered the



distance, my stomach turned. I pictured the vast wastes of earth and aloneness between where I was and where God was calling me. From the third floor of a Holiday Inn, I tried to grasp 3,400 miles of mystery. Forget it. Then I realized the truth I am sharing with you today. I did not have to cross North America by bicycle in one day. All I had to do was plan that day's ride. Not even that. I needed only to find the first road out of Los Angeles. I had only to put my foot on top of that right pedal and push the crank. One turn of the crank—and only one—would start me down the path. Boston was out there somewhere over the horizon. The horizon was not my business. It was a goal, yes, but not my dose of daily reality. I had to leave my hotel room. How is that for an immediate goal? Here is an even more immediate goal: I had to brush my teeth. Could I do that? Yes, I'd

done it thousands of times before. That was the first step, then, that would eventually lead to bicycling all the way to Boston from Los Angeles: brushing my teeth on the morning of June 8, 1980.

## JUST DESERTS

God knew how hard the Sinai Desert would be for poor Israel. To ease their way, He gave them an opening miracle they would talk about for centuries: the parting of the Red Sea. This was a pretty good miracle; dang impressive by anyone's standards. It gave Israel a good start. Moses breathed a sigh of relief; maybe he wasn't crazy after all. The people got a kick out of it; it was so interesting looking back and seeing Pharaoh's army clobbered by the closing waves.

Safe at last.

Well, no. Safe from mortal danger, yes, but still subject to the twin treacheries of fear and doubt.

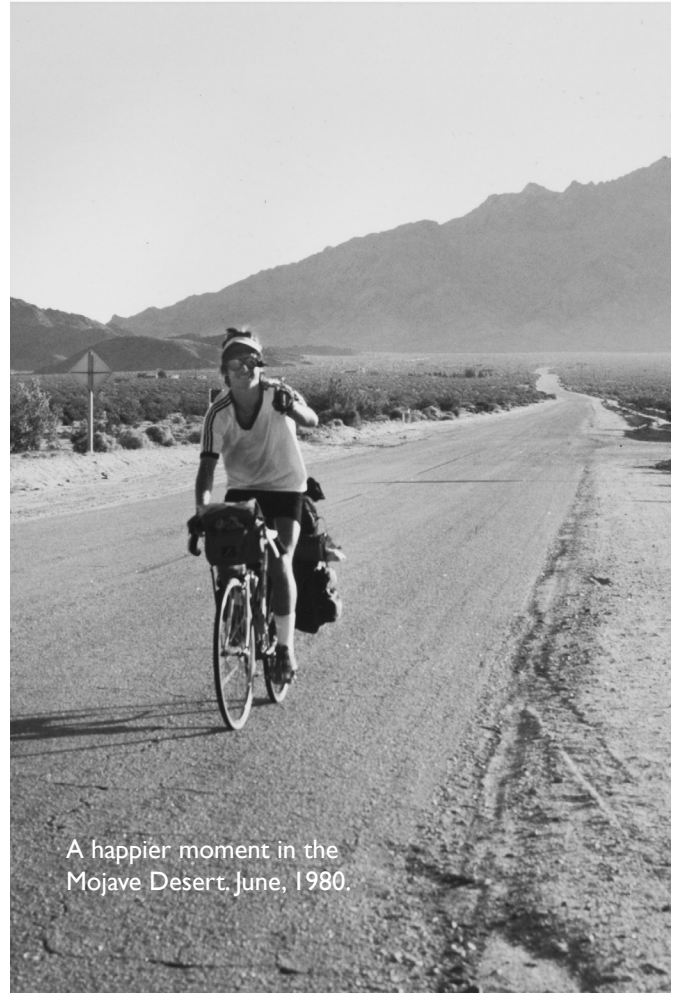
In the wilderness, the eyes of Israel consistently forsook God in favor of physical circumstance. They challenged

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God and Moses continually for food and drink: more food, more drink. God produced these by miraculous means, but Israel had a learning disability. They constantly doubted that God would keep providing for them. Their

common complaints were, 1) "It's not good enough," and 2) "Yes, but what have you done for us *lately*?"

The wilderness I faced in June of 1980 was milder than Israel's, but still challenging to a 20th century man just turned twenty. In the Mojave Desert, my journey began in earnest. One day on Interstate 15 between Los Angeles and Las Vegas, the temperature hit 114 degrees. Mile after mile passed without a town or even a rest area. Around two o'clock that afternoon, I felt lightheaded and desperately needed shade. I found it in the form of an abandoned dumpster. I dismounted my 1976 Ross Gran Tour ten-speed and folded myself into a square-foot of relative paradise un-baked by the sun. For the first time in my life, I felt like an animal; I needed shade to live. In one sense, I reveled in the adventure. In another sense, I realized how humiliated and alone I was. This could have been depressing, and it sometimes was. I knew that it was all temporary. The dumpster was not my ultimate destina-



tion, but a small mercy of God placed along the way, to relieve me.

In whatever wilderness you find yourself, God will provide. The provision may sometimes seem slim, but it is proof that God is thinking about you. There are no five-star restaurants in the Mojave Desert. There were no vending machines dispensing onions or leeks in the Sinai Wilderness. This is where faith comes in. It is always easier to stay where you live; but then God calls you, and impels you to move—as He did with Abram. Are you better off, then, if God doesn't call you? Never. Don't short-shrift the Creator of the universe having a plan for you, then calling you to do it.

## QUIT NOT

Can we quit the calling? While we can't quit Christ (He cannot forsake His own body—2 Timothy 2:13), I believe we can quit the high calling and be disqualified from ruling and reigning with Him. We can say, "Enough suffering!" and go back to Egypt. I don't recommend it.



When you stand before Christ, you'll regret having quit. In 1980, a handful of freaky hot days would not send me hightailing back to Ohio. Israel, I believe, would have gladly taken the next flight back to Egypt—in a heartbeat. Only Moses kept them from it. One man with a vision kept an entire nation from returning to what would later be allegorized as “the flesh.” Moses cajoled, prayed without ceasing, and pep-talked his brains out to those people. In the end, at the door of the Promised Land, the entire nation balked—save for two men. In the end, even the cajoling pep-talker doubted God and turned to dust at the door of the What God Said He Would Do.

So you have imperfect faith. Congratulations. So do I. Guess what? In this era of grace, it's good enough.

God has set our hands to the plow of following Him. We are exhorted to leave both the good and the bad. God has called us to glory. The path to *our* promised land will be fraught with trials as well as blessings. On this path, God has promised to neither leave nor forsake us. In our wilderness, untold miracles abide. To experience them, we must walk into them.

## MIRACLES

Ladies and gentleman, I, Martin Zender, still believe in miracles. I do not believe in Pentecostal-type wonders, but in the small marvels sewn by God into the fabric of everyday life. On that 1980 trans-continental bicycle trip,



strangers pulled over to the side of the road to hand me a Coke. In the heat and humidity of Nebraska one afternoon, a man practically emptied his picnic cooler for me. In every state of the union, people consistently invited me into their homes to sleep, eat and enjoy a hot shower.

Are these not miracles? Is not a fruit stand that appears in upstate New York on Route 20 in the middle of a national heat wave a miracle? Yes. To me, these things are all miracles: water, Coke, shade, fruit, strangers who love you, another safe place to lay one's head for the night. Isn't this enough? Even a cornfield in the middle of Iowa was, for me, a safe and wonderful place that God chose for my rest. From there, I dreamed beneath the hot stars.

## BETTER THAN BIRDS

Unless you're thinking of your future glory, tomorrow is too cumbersome to contemplate. Food? Shelter? Money? These too easily become worries. Do your daily work at a sane pace—God will provide. God takes care of lilies and sparrows. Does He not care more for you than these?

Step out into the adventure to which God is calling you. Then, don't look back. The Red Sea crashed shut behind the Israelites; the escape route back into Egypt was forever closed. Some bridges back to our pleasant little ruts seem open to us; an option. Do not consider them thus. They are not open—not to you. You are God's adventurer. What you did in the past, you did. You did it, and it is a monument to your life. Good job. Now stop staring at the trophy. Or stop staring at the failure. The past *had* to happen, every detail of it. Nothing of it can be changed. This is where the sovereignty of God comforts and cures us. Use the sovereignty of God like a lever to move away problems. The sovereignty of God is not merely a teaching. It is not a doctrine of our theology. It is a reality, a tool, a practical help giving us peace about our ragged past and our future expectation. The future is just as set in stone as the past. God knows where He is taking us because He already sees it. He pre-set our destiny before we were born. We walk in a bubble of ignorance, unaware of what the next moment holds. God wants it that way; ignorance is His gift to us. It develops our faith and keeps us looking and longing for Him. It's good enough for now.

God is “out there,” but He's also here. You will survive today. Retreat is not an option, so go to bed one more time and see if you wake up. You probably will. Even if you don't, future glory is yours as a member of Christ's body.

I am here with you, walking alongside to the sounds of divine music. —MZ