

## A Christmas Letter to the Children I Love

*11For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. 12Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. 13You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart." - Jeremiah 29*

This has been an eventful year for all of us. Many very good and very bad things have happened, some temporary and some life-changing. I know that when you look into your heart after these times, and after the times of former years, you have much to ponder and wonder about. What are we each bringing forward into our lives to come, and into the lives of our children and future children? How do we measure the success or failure of our lives, moment by moment in passing time, and ultimately in eternity? What gives us strength and wisdom to encounter unknown, uncertain, and sometimes threatening things? How do we find fulfillment in the important relationships in our lives? What do we do about the void that appears within us that we can't seem to fill?

Susan and I have asked, and continue asking questions like these, just as you will all of your lives. That's what I want to address in this letter to you.

To start, I will tell you some things about myself.

I didn't find the important answers to the important questions until my 30's. Before that, I relied on what the world that I lived in threw in my direction, all the while trying to make sense of it all, and not getting very good results. As a child and teenager, I depended on what I saw my parents and other family adults doing in their own lives. They told me things to do to make my life work well, and some of it seemed good, and some of it turned out quite short of good results. I was one of those slower ones that lack the capacity to connect the dots that other people seem to have no trouble doing. I was "out of synch" throughout my early life, right into my thirties. Despite this drawback, I turned out to be quite adventurous, exploring lots of exotic avenues that popped up in my path, not because I sought them, but because I was what you might call "an adventurous follower." I did what a lot of different people suggested to me.

The people that influenced me all had strong initiative in their own lives.

My father supported his family through the challenges of the Great Depression, World War Two, and the challenges of succeeding economically and professionally with only an eighth grade education. He learned to rely on his wits and hard work, using the resources available to him to overcome obstacles. Materially and socially, measured by the standards of his culture, he accomplished his goals. His failures came in other areas of his and his family's lives. But what he contributed to my life and understanding from his strong areas has carried me forward through many crises.

My older brother broke away from the West Texas culture and literally launched himself into the wide world. A super-achiever as a teenager, when he graduated from high school, he joined to merchant marines and traveled exotic oceans, he hitchhiked across America exploring whatever interested him, and saw himself as the "rugged individualist" popularized in the post-World War Two period. Fifteen years my senior, he became my hero from the time I reached school age until I saw his life goals began to fall apart twenty years later. My own life



took on his pattern soon after I started college, and I launched into unknown, and unwise directions for a decade or so, until I began to see my own life approaching the same dead end that my brother faced.

Spiritually, I had other strong influences that carried me into some dangerous places. Not having any strong foundation in understanding who God is or my relation to Him as I grew up, I faced my life with only bits and pieces that I picked up in sporadic church going, Christmas and Easter plays, and a prayer and a psalm that I learned somewhere. My grandmother taught me the "I lay me down to sleep" prayer, which I abandoned sometime in my boyhood. The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm got me through a terrifying period of nightmares and fear of the dark around the time of my tenth year.

Navy boot camp misery, pneumonia, and near death brought me a little closer to God and His Word, in the form of a Navy issued New Testament, that I opened for the first time laying in my bunk before lights out. However, when life got easier and I felt more confident in my naval career, I forgot about God, for the most part.

After four years in the Navy, I started work for the telephone company in Dallas in a job my father's influence helped me get. He retired that same year and I found myself living alone in Dallas, working at a job I didn't really care for, but I didn't have enough imagination to do anything else. I was good at the work and made good money, but I felt a huge vacuum in my life.

My nephew, Rick showed up in Dallas with his future wife, Linda, and their baby. Rick had always taken the lead in our relationship, and I soon fell under his sway. He tried to convince me to join him in pursuing Hinduism, and we even spent time visiting a full-fledged monastery, or ashram, which he later joined. I delved into the foundational writings of Hinduism and made a serious effort to understand its value, but in the end found it to be a dead end, along with Buddhism, which had branched off from Hinduism.

Rick's idea of a joint business venture led me to California, and though the business never happened. I found a job driving a truck around the San Francisco area and found room and board with a married couple with a spare room. After the novelty of it all wore off, I found my life just as empty as before. Just when I decided that I had enough of California, my sister convinced me to stay with her. She was affluent, connected with a fast, elite set, and full of New and Old Age philosophies. I spent three years exploring the New Age variations, liberal free-thinking, humanistic psychology, and all the post hippie phenomenon of the 70's.

At the end of that time, I found myself spiritually bankrupt without a direction or motivation to do anything constructive. I felt like I was being smothered in a deadly fog. I literally fled California and came back to Arkansas. During the next couple of months I hit the lowest level of my life. I realized that nothing that I had done in my life mattered. Every direction that I had chosen led nowhere and the void in my soul yawned huge before me. I couldn't see a way to go.

Out of desperation, even though I didn't have confidence to seek a job, I tried to volunteer at St. Mary's Hospital to help with patients, even just reading to them. The employment manager said that insurance restrictions prohibited direct contact with patients by non-hospital staff, but,



he said that he could hire me as an orderly. I couldn't even fill out the employment application. I took the empty page back to him, prepared to leave. Amazingly, he hired me, anyway. I knew that I had been rescued. By helping other people, over a few months, I found my confidence and energy restored. From there, I went to other occupations: managing a farmer's market, selling newspaper advertising, writing a feature column for a newspaper, and finally, working at The Frame Shoppe, which I later bought.

During this time, I met and married Susan and though we struggled financially, I felt my life coming back together. In a few years, however, as financial and health pressures weighed me down, I realized that I had a mountain to learn about being a good husband, and I was a terrible father; I didn't know how to deal with all of it. Every day the load seemed heavier and more impossible to carry. I felt a heavy weight of despair. I came to another spiritual crisis.

In this time, Susan insisted that we take the kids to church. At first, I couldn't relate to what I heard the country preacher say, even though, over time, I came to accept that the Bible might have some truth. But when my life pressures grew harder and harder to deal with and I reached that point where I felt paralyzed with desperation, I didn't know what to do. Before, when I felt this way, it had affected only me, but now I had a family depending on me and I couldn't bear to let them down. I couldn't bring myself to talk to Susan about it.

I remember the day that I sat in the church pew, feeling buried under the weight of my desperation, but unable to talk to Susan about it. The light from the stained glass shined colors on me as I began to seriously talk to God. I admitted to Him that I couldn't solve the problems that I faced, that I was bankrupt again. I told Him that if He could give me what I needed to take care of my family, that I wanted Him to do it, and that I would try to do what He wants me to do. I felt the pressure easing up inside, and I realized that God really did respond to me.

Three months later Walmart offered me job, I sold my business, and, even though Susan and I had to work very hard to make ends meet for years to come, we made steady progress and eventually paid off all of our debts.

More than that, Susan and I discovered a source of strength and wisdom that has given us answers and solutions to every tough situation we have faced. It all comes down to giving all you have to paying attention to what God wants to do in your life, day by day, and sometimes minute by minute.

This brings me to the real purpose of this letter. I am asking you to consider some very important questions and how your answers effect your life and your children's.

These are some of the most important questions you will ever ask yourself. Please ponder them closely and answer them for yourself sincerely.

*Who is God to you?*

*How do you know who God is?*

*What is the difference between God and "the Universe?"*

*What is the difference between the God of the Bible and the "gods" of the non-Christian religions of the world?*

*What is your relationship with God?*

*What do you say to each other?*

*What do you want from God?*

*What does God want from you?*

These questions may seem hard to relate to if you don't already have a relationship with the one true God, but I promise you that getting the answers to these is, not only extremely important, but desperately urgent. Even if you may know the answers from reading or hearing someone talk, or preach, about them, you still have to find the answers that are true to your own heart, mind, and soul. This is critical for you and critical for your children! When you find these answers, you will discover that it deeply affects every part of your life, including when you leave this world.

I believe that your generation and your children's and grandchildren's generations will face the toughest challenges that this world has ever seen. The only way that you and they can survive is with an intimate knowledge and relationship with the God who loves you, but who can't save you unless you come to Him and accept Him for who He is. He will welcome you, because He gave everything for you. I know this is true because Susan and I, and many others, have discovered this for ourselves. I only wish that I had been your age when I did.

If you need any help from me to find the answers to these questions, or others, that will ring true to your own heart, please ask me. But more importantly, ask God.

*If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. James 1:5*

Finally, I want you to know that I love you and I pray for you to give yourself to the God who loves you so much that He died for you and took the punishment for all the bad things you have ever done, or that you will do. All He asks is for you to accept the gift He will give you, come to Him with every concern in your life, trust in Him to bring you the right results, and do the best you can to do what is right.

Try to read your Bible every day.

Mike

12/25/2015