

15

A Sweet Work of Sovereignty

*“And we know that God causes all things to work together for good
to those who love God,
to those who are called according to His purpose”
Romans 8:28*

It wasn't until well after I was born again at age nineteen that I started to recognize how God had prepared me for salvation long before I actually repented from my sins and embraced Jesus Christ. There are delightful hints of sovereignty throughout my

childhood and into my young adult life that testify to God's tender and patient care for my soul. Yet, to appreciate these hints of divine providence it is necessary to start at the beginning.

Growing Up Catholic

I was born in Billings, Montana and grew up in a practicing Roman Catholic family. We went regularly to Sunday Mass and were faithful to attend all the holiday services. My parents participated in various Bible studies and retreats, and they made sure my three sisters and I were all baptized as infants. Even our education was Catholic. From Kindergarten through high school my parents made sure that all four of their children would be taught and trained in the same manner they had been several years prior—in the local Catholic school system. I even started my college education with two years in a Catholic university, but we will talk about that more in a moment.

Although my introduction to the gospel occurred outside of the Catholic Church, I am grateful to God for using my upbringing to solidify some important theological truths in my mind and heart in preparation to hear the good news of God's grace in Christ. As a result of my education and experience in the Church, I believed in God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit; I believed that Jesus died on a cross and rose from the dead; and I believed in heaven and hell.

I even had an interest in the priesthood at an early age. I didn't like the Church's requirement for celibacy—I liked girls and wanted to get married—but I admired those who had seemingly dedicated themselves to serving God and helping others. Perhaps I could be exempt from years of tradition—or become a catalyst for change—and be the first married priest? Well, that wasn't going to happen any time soon, and, frankly, I had other competing interests like making a lot of money and becoming a famous musician

that pushed these budding desires for the priesthood out of the realm of serious consideration.

As I made my way through grade school and high school, however, I found myself becoming less interested in religion on one hand, and more interested in it on the other. Mass was excruciatingly boring, and serving God was not an option if it meant that I had to give up what I wanted to do with my life. As I transitioned into my first year of high school, my life started to take a turn.

Confrontation

When I was in eighth grade, my oldest sister, Kathy, confronted my parents and me, claiming she had recently been “saved.” (By this point all three sisters were out of the house and were either married or living on their own, so I was the only child at home.) Whatever “saved” meant, we weren’t sure. One thing we were sure of, though, was the dramatic change in my sister’s life—it was undeniable. She had swiftly, but certainly, turned from a life characterized by cursing, anger, disregard for Jesus, and disdain for church, to now seeking only to speak words of edification and taking strides to control her temper. She also told us she loved Jesus, loved going to church, and enjoyed studying the Bible. What? This could not be the same sister with whom I grew up! Indeed, she wasn’t. As I would learn later: she had become a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17).

What hadn’t changed in my sister, however, was her “in-your-face” kind of approach to personal conversation. She now concentrated her energy into challenging our religious beliefs and our spiritual state before God. Contrary to Roman Catholic teaching, my sister claimed that Scripture was the only authoritative Word of God and

that being in right standing with God was not accomplished by our good works but by faith in Jesus Christ who had already accomplished our salvation on the cross and through the resurrection. Furthermore, because we were dead in our sins and trespasses and our hearts were set against God, it was necessary to be born again by the Holy Spirit and receive a new heart with new affections.

Such statements were startling to my parents and me. Salvation? Faith alone? Born again? All of these were foreign concepts to us. Yet, what was most disturbing was the claim that the Roman Catholic Church was wrong on such foundational issues like the Bible and salvation. My sister may have found a new and different expression of the Christian religion, but surely she was mistaken to suggest that the Catholic Church had been teaching such serious falsehood for centuries.

As we continued to reel from my sister's theological onslaught, it became apparent that she probably wouldn't be appeased by our polite head nods and dismissive smiles. We would need to go to her church and find out what all the fuss was about.

A New Church

So we did. Breaking with years of Sunday tradition, we made our way across town to a small Baptist church. Although there were many things that distinguished this little gathering from our typical experience at Mass, one feature stood out above all the others: the preaching. I did not understand much of what was said from the pulpit, but what I did comprehend intrigued me and provoked some ongoing curiosity. Generally speaking, however, I was mainly caught up in the preacher's homiletic skills, but I wasn't a believer yet. I was like Benjamin Franklin, who, while admiring George Whitefield's ability to captivate an audience with his superior rhetorical talents, wanted

nothing to do with the content of his teaching. (George Whitefield [1714-1770] was a famous Reformed evangelist in North America during the colonial period. He was a contemporary of Benjamin Franklin and garnered the praise of this founding father, though not for his doctrine, for Franklin despised Reformed theology and was, for all intents and purposes, a deist.)

But my parents and I continued to attend my sister's little church on a semi-regular basis, jumping back and forth from Sunday Mass, finding ways to excuse our occasional absences from Mass when questioned by concerned friends. Over the next several months, however, it started to become clear that if one were to take the Bible for what it taught, my sister was correct: the Roman Catholic Church was wrong. Salvation was by grace through faith alone, not by works or nor by taking the sacraments or by church attendance. And not only was it wrong, in our experience, it had neglected to introduce the matter of salvation altogether. It was in that little church on Rimrock Road in Billings, Montana that we first heard of the concept of salvation and that man is dead in his sins and must be made right with God. So, from a purely objective standpoint, it became increasingly clear that we had a choice to make: remain in the Catholic Church or transfer our allegiance to my sister's church.

Tradition!

We quickly learned that such a move was easier said than done. My parents had been Catholic for over fifty years and had dense religious and social ties to the Church. Catholic teaching declares that if you break away from the Church then you were choosing to separate yourself from any hope of salvation. The *Catholic Catechism* states unambiguously, "Basing itself on Scripture and Tradition, the Council teaches that the Church, a pilgrim now on earth, is necessary for salvation: the one Christ is the mediator

and the way of salvation; he is present to us in his body which is the Church. He himself explicitly asserted the necessity of faith and Baptism, and thereby affirmed at the same time the necessity of the Church which men enter through Baptism as through a door. Hence they could not be saved who, knowing that the Catholic Church was founded as necessary by God through Christ, would refuse either to enter it or to remain in it” (Part 1, Section 2, Chapter 3, Article 9:846).

Furthermore, most of my parents’ friends, business associates, and former schoolmates were Catholic. To leave the Church was to leave everything.

I didn’t have nearly the same amount of trouble as my parents did making the decision to abandon the Catholic Church and start attending my sister’s church. Although I had no desire to live in accordance with what Bible taught, it made sense to me that it alone was the Word of God and that we should go to a church that teaches the Bible correctly.

Justified

Yet, with more exposure to the Bible week after week, my parents slowly but surely came to a full realization of the gospel. They recognized they were sinners and needed a Savior, and they understood the gospel of justification by faith alone. To be justified means to be “declared righteous.” The moment a person places genuine faith in Jesus Christ, they are declared perfectly righteous in relation to God’s law and are no longer subject to condemnation. God can justify sinners because Jesus Christ fulfilled all righteousness in the believer’s place and died to pay the penalty of the believer’s sin (see Romans 3:19-26; 4:5).

My senior year of high school, my parents and I were baptized. Wonderful, except one major problem: their son didn’t know Jesus Christ.

It should have been clear to anyone that really knew me that I wasn't a born-again believer, despite my baptism. I had no desire to fellowship with other believers (I thought Christians were weird and annoying and too religious), no love for Jesus Christ, and no desire to live in obedience to God's Word. Indeed, the night I was baptized, I went out with friends and committed with vigor the same sins from which I had supposedly turned. My profession of faith was a sham. But the hypocrisy actually began a couple years earlier.

Hypocrisy

For several years at my high school, the summer going into one's junior year was traditionally marked by a memorable one-week *Young Life* retreat in Michigan called "Castaways." Although "Castaways" was intended to be a time of spiritual refreshment and renewal for students, it was predominately an outdoor sports playground and a seed-bed for immoral relationships. Nevertheless, every evening after dinner we would gather in an auditorium to hear a gospel message. I remember distinctly one female student from our group devastated and angry because the speaker had explained the nature of sin and that, apart from Christ, none of us were morally "good" or in right standing with God.

I was unfazed by such pronouncements—I had heard these things before—but I did want to make a religious display before my friends. So, one night during one of our meetings, when asked by the speaker if anyone wanted to be saved, I stood up, and repeated the phrase, "Today I am giving my life to Jesus Christ."

I reveled in the attention and subsequent pats on the back. By professing faith in Christ, I could distinguish myself from others and appear spiritual and concerned about

the “important” things of life. Truthfully, under my religious façade was a deep desire to experience real change on the inside and find peace with God through the gospel. I just didn’t know how to get there.

Almost immediately after my return home I was assailed (from my perspective) by my sister and her pastor. “Derek, I heard you professed Christ last week!” my sister exclaimed. “You need to meet with the pastor.”

Within a few days, there I was, sitting across the table from our pastor, squirming under the interrogation and pointed exhortations. “Now that you’re a Christian, we need to talk about how to live for Christ,” the pastor lectured.

I wasn’t too excited. “Let’s slow down,” I thought; I don’t want to get too serious about this whole Jesus thing. I don’t want to change my life or have to hang out with other Christians.

But I played the part for a while. I went to youth group occasionally during the week and attended church on Sunday with my parents. I debated with my friends about the stark differences between what the Catholic Church taught and what the Bible taught, despite the plain fact that these doctrines were making no difference in my life. Actually, I became so skilled in the rhetoric and language of Christianity that I won an award my senior year for penning a stirring narrative about a teenager who had come to faith in Christ. The story would later be published—a frightening reminder, forever fixed in a book, of how much a person may sound like a Christian and talk eloquently of salvation, yet remain in spiritual darkness and death.

Under the guise of my selective spirituality, however, there brewed a longing to be right with God. I already had a kind of “prayer life,” so I would sometimes pray at night for things to go well for me and for my family. I would pray for stuff I wanted and

ask for deliverance from consequences I was facing due to my sinful choices. There was, however, a desire, lurking deep within these prayers, to be saved and to end the hypocrisy. Yet, I knew that coming to faith in Jesus Christ required repentance from sin. I had to be willing to give up my current lifestyle and submit myself to Jesus Christ. No longer could I be the Lord and Ruler of my life. I needed to bend my knee to the Lord Jesus Christ and to His will.

Resistance

There was a problem with the whole repentance thing: I didn't *want* to give up my sin. I loved it. I wanted to keep living for myself and make my own decisions and do my own thing without the hindrance of church or the embarrassment of saying I was "living for Jesus." I started to realize that I couldn't come to Jesus Christ unless God did something major in my life. I found myself praying—hesitatingly, fearfully—that God would bring some event into my life so that I could come to Christ. I wanted salvation... but I didn't. The only way out of the malaise of indecision would be a sovereign interruption into my life by God Himself.

The following year I set out from Billings, Montana for Portland, Oregon. I wanted to go to a small college in a cool town that was just far enough away from my parents to keep them from visiting every weekend. The University of Portland was the place. It wasn't soon into my college education, however, that I found myself deep in despair.

Initially, I made friends quickly and reveled in the freedoms of college life. Partying took on a new excitement as I was able to come and go as I pleased, inebriated or sober, and I didn't need to check in with parents or worry about a curfew. This was the life!

Depression

Soon, however, I started to sense a growing cloud of hopelessness hovering over my life. Saturday mornings were typically the worst, although these onslaughts of depression were indiscriminate in their choice of the day and time they would appear.

I had started my college career as a music performance major. I changed my major to business finance the following semester because I had enough sense to know that pursuing the musician's path would probably not lead to a lucrative future. Frankly, I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life. Once during my freshman year I even suggested casually to my roommate that I wanted to be a pastor. How I had the gall to offer such a ridiculous suggestion of a personal career choice while living in utter immorality I'm not sure. What was clear was that I didn't know who I was or what I was doing with my life. (Interestingly, my unconverted desire for pastoral ministry was also a hint of God's sovereign kindness, as we will see a little later.)

These bouts with depression continued as I found myself living only for the weekend. Thoughts of drinking, partying with friends, and committing immorality filled my mind incessantly. I slogged through my schoolwork each week by leaning on the hope of an intoxicating weekend. But I would wake up on Saturday morning, hung-over and empty, haunted with the inescapable feeling that my life was meaningless.

Also, because I was away from my parents, my church attendance dropped off completely. This couldn't be helped, I reasoned: I don't have a car and I don't know much about the churches around here. I will just wait until I get home. My profligate lifestyle and neglect to attend church, however, didn't stop God's pursuit of my soul. He soon invaded my life through a man named Alan.

Alan was with *Campus Crusades for Christ* (now called “Cru”). During freshman orientation earlier that year I had quickly scribbled out a yellow religious affiliation card provided by the school. I said that I was a Christian and checked the box that indicated that I would like to have someone contact me about my faith. Perhaps this gesture would appease my mother who was already pestering me to find a church to attend regularly. Anyway, I didn’t think that someone would actually contact me. Alan did.

Alan would call frequently, visit my dorm, and take me out to lunch. I wasn’t going to church but at least I was meeting regularly with a Christian; this should tide my mom over, I thought. It did, and for a while I enjoyed meeting with Alan. He would talk to me about the Lord and about Scripture, and he would show genuine interest in my life. He would even come to see me in my room while I was hung over. He wasn’t intimidated by my hypocrisy, sinful lifestyle, or my occasional annoyance over his refusal to leave me alone. He was the real deal. Deep down, I wanted to be like him.

My freshman year ended and I went back to Montana. I worked for my dad, partied with high school friends, and maintained a lifestyle similar to the one I kept in Portland. My parents, recognizing that I was now a college student, eased their curfew requirements so that I could stay out nearly as late as did while at school. As my freedoms increased, so did the opportunity to commit sin. And, the more my opportunity to commit sin increased, the less I wanted to go to church.

The hypocrisy was starting to become too great a burden to bear. So long as I could stay away from church I wouldn’t have to deal with a conscience that was straining under the weight of blatant contradiction. I had professed Christ and received baptism; I talked like a Christian when it suited me; and I spoke with others about the deficiencies

of their religion, but I was walking in rebellion against Christ and his Word. I was a fraud and deep down I knew it. But the desire for deliverance was increasing.

The following semester I was back in Portland. Although I was vice-president of my dorm and adding to my boast-worthy experiences daily, the depression that attended my first year in college was growing. Shortly into my second year, I was dumped by a girl for the first time in my life; I was confronted by our Resident Director for the obvious failure to execute my responsibility as vice-president; and I was wallowing in a general lack of direction.

Conviction

Nevertheless, I also found that the desire to give my life to Christ was increasing, but I didn't think I would be able to really come to Jesus until after college. The pressure from friends and the ridicule I anticipated persuaded me that I would have to wait until I graduated to repent and trust Christ. Such a life change just wasn't possible right then. I did keep the door open to divine intervention, but short of a dramatic, life-changing event, I was convinced that I couldn't come to Christ.

That winter I went back to Montana for Christmas break. Because our vacation started earlier than many other colleges that my high school friends attended, my friend Rob and I were the only ones in town. The obvious conclusion: let's hang out, drink, and reminisce about the good ole' days. So we did.

That evening, only one day after I arrived in town from Portland, Rob and I grabbed a liter of hard alcohol and tossed shots of vodka with beer chasers in his basement. Although we were content drinking by ourselves, we soon learned of a party in the Heights—about eight miles north of Rob's house. We gathered our brew and stumbled outside.

In the driveway were two vehicles. On the left was my dad's beautiful black Dodge Ram 1500. On the right was Rob's white Volvo, desperately in need of a car wash and body detail. Although we were both drunk, I was less drunk than Rob, so I said I would drive. But, I pressed, I wasn't going to drive my dad's truck in my current state; I would need to drive Rob's Volvo.

At about 12:00 AM we set out for the party. We met some old friends and made a few new superficial acquaintances. We drank some more and talked about who knows what. After awhile it was clear that small talk and cheap beer was about as good as it was going to get, so Rob and I decided to leave. Despite our drunkenness, I was still in better shape than Rob, and so I was, by default, the "designated" driver. We climbed in the car and left for Rob's house.

Only a few blocks away from the party, we pulled out onto Main Street. As I rolled through the green light—careful to obey all the traffic laws so as not to cause suspicion—I glanced in my rearview mirror; what I saw brought about instant panic: the police car behind me had cued his emergency lights.

Broken

I drove for a few moments and turned into a nearby parking lot. The officer approached the car and signaled for me to lower my window. I obeyed his request but with my heart in my throat. It became quickly apparent that we had been drinking. A second officer appeared at Rob's door and motioned for us both to get out. I was swiftly escorted to the front passenger's side of the police car.

The police officer who had first come to my door was now with me in the police car. He said a few words and then put a breathalyzer to my mouth. I feigned a few weak attempts at blowing into the breathalyzer, hoping to outsmart the machine. Undeterred

from carrying out his duty, the officer exhorted me to make a genuine effort to blow into the breathalyzer. I finally did, and it was immediately apparent that I was well over the legal limit. The officer read me my rights, cuffed my hands behind my back, and placed me into the backseat of the police car.

I was cold, frightened, and the heavy reality of what was happening started to settle upon my mind. My initial thoughts, however, were not about what this would cost me in terms of relational turmoil and earthly consequence. The first inclination was to turn to God and cry out in repentance. This was it. This was the event for which I had been reluctantly praying. I could repent from my sins and *really mean it*.

The other officer finally corralled Rob into a second police car and both cars left that empty parking lot for the police station. There we were, subjected to further sobriety tests and questioning. After the interrogation, we were allowed to call our parents. While waiting for my dad and mom to pick me up from the station, I asked the arresting officer why he had pulled me over. “Was I swerving or driving poorly?” I asked curiously.

“No,” came his semi-amused reply. “You had a broken taillight.”

It didn’t dawn on me until much later—as I learned more about God’s sovereignty in salvation—that had we taken my dad’s truck that night, we probably wouldn’t have been pulled over. Praise God for that crummy Volvo.

I could now give my life to Christ. In his kindness, God provided a way in which I could stop drinking and call a halt to a life committed to partying. As I returned to Portland for my second semester, I would be able to avoid the party scene by using the excuse of my DUI to convince my friends that I should no longer drink. Later in the

semester, I would provide the deeper reason why I had chosen to give up this kind of lifestyle and why I was no longer interested in chasing girls.

Born Again

Much of this came as shock to my friends, and few could understand what I was doing. Nevertheless, the calling that Christ had put upon my life was stronger than the thought of losing friends and familiarity. And although I grieved that many relationships were now coming to an end, the Lord gave me an unwavering passion to pursue Him at all costs. Through a sweet work of sovereignty, the Lord Jesus had brought me to genuine faith and repentance and rescued me from eternal condemnation and a life of futility.

A New Way of Living

Now that I was born again, my latent desires for pastoral ministry blossomed full-bloom, and my longing to study Scripture and devote myself to preaching the truth was almost overwhelming. I completed my year at Portland and transferred to The Master's College (TMC)—a small Christian college north of Los Angeles—in order to study the Bible and prepare for ministry.

The following summer and my first semester at TMC was a time of spiritual bliss. I discovered that a new love for Christians and Christian fellowship had replaced the embarrassment I used to feel around other professing believers. I looked forward to singing praises to God with his people and I enjoyed hearing the preaching and teaching of God's Word, so I made church a priority. My heart, formally only capable of indulging in thoughts of sexual immorality, had been purged by God's Holy Spirit, and a new desire for purity brought me to break with several patterns of habitual sin.

Equally remarkable was the fact that God had dislodged the hopelessness that previously characterized my life by giving me that sense of purpose that all men and women were created to have. The all-consuming call on my life now was to glorify God in everything I did, and I was ready to respond to that call. “I’ve wasted nineteen years of my life,” I reasoned, “I need to make up for lost time.”

An Over-Zealous Disciple

So, shortly after I arrived to TMC, I sought ways I could serve God and live to the fullest this life He had given me. I went on a local mission trip, joined a Bible study, went regularly with friends to Santa Monica’s *Third Street Promenade* to evangelize, over-loaded my class schedule, started playing drums for my church’s college group, and even joined the cross-country team—all within the first semester. Yet, my unofficial plan to catapult myself into spiritual maturity backfired, and I soon found myself in a mire of spiritual confusion.

At a time when I should have been growing my roots deep and focusing on the basics of Christian discipleship, I pursued “busyness” in ministry. Partly out of ignorance, but mostly out of pride, I believed that spiritual growth was stimulated primarily by religious activity, and that my maturity was gauged by the sheer amount of activity. So the busier I was, the better. Unfortunately, it didn’t take long to learn that the tender branches of my newly sprouted faith could not bear the weight of such rigorous demands.

Coupled with and enflamed by this misguided pursuit of spiritual maturity was a growing lack of assurance in my salvation. Although God had purified my heart in a miraculous way when I was regenerated, I had not yet learned that sin still indwells genuine Christians (Romans 7:14-25), and that one of the primary responsibilities of the

Christian life was to put such sin to death (Colossians 3:5). And, even though I believed the gospel, I was slowly putting more and more confidence in my religious activity rather than Christ. I was coming under the Galatian indictment: “Are you so foolish, having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh” (Galatians 3:3)? Yes, I was.

Religious busyness, a misunderstanding about the reality of sin in a believer, and doubts about my own salvation conspired to create the perfect storm, and I was caught in the vortex of spiritual depression. I struggled through three more semesters and after my second year at TMC, I asked my parents if I could take a semester off of school, work at home, and take some time to heal my soul. After I insisted that I was committed to completing my college degree, my parents reluctantly agreed to let me take a semester off.

A Time to Rest

That summer I worked for my dad and sought to remain faithful to church despite the fact that I had come to convince myself that I had committed the unpardonable sin. Nevertheless, even though I was struggling mightily with the assurance of my salvation, I couldn't walk away from Christ. I wanted the Lord more than anything, and the thought of losing Him was a fate worse than death. Through the encouragement of my parents, my family, my pastor, my friends from college, and unrelenting discipleship from Scott, an older brother in Christ who had befriended me two years prior, the Lord slowly drew me out of the quagmire of spiritual depression.

As I returned to TMC for the spring semester, I decided that given my spiritual struggles, pastoral ministry was probably not where the Lord was leading me. I began to think about other career options, and I soon landed on elementary education. I could

complete my bachelor's degree in Bible and add an extra year or two to earn my teaching credential and perhaps pursue a master's degree in education.

By God's grace, I graduated in December, 2002 and moved into a friend P. J.'s house near TMC while substitute teaching first and second graders at a nearby Christian school. His parents allowed me to live in their home at little cost while I worked and looked for a place to pursue a teaching credential and a master's degree in education.

The only problem with this plan was that I didn't really want to teach elementary school. Although I valued the work of educators and considered teaching a worthy profession, I longed to serve the Church. I wanted to study Scripture, teach Scripture, and minister the Word to God's people. Yet, given my spiritual struggles only a year ago, I was unwilling to take any active steps toward ministry.

This indecision eventually bred complacency, laziness, and listlessness in my life. I found myself substitute teaching only two to three times a week, while spending most of my free time watching movies, hanging out aimlessly with friends, surfing the Internet, and playing video games. But God would reveal His sovereign care over my life once again.

An Opportunity for Ministry

Because I had so much time on my hands, I decided to take a week to visit a college friend, Bobby, in the San Francisco Bay Area. He was a high school pastor at a church in the South Bay, and he invited me and another friend up for a few days to check out his ministry and record some music. While there, Bobby informed me that the middle school pastor position had recently opened, and he encouraged me to apply for the job. I hesitated, but Bobby was persistent, and he soon involved another pastor—his supervisor, Cliff—to help persuade me. I obliged his request and applied for the job.

During my initial interview, I indicated to Cliff my reluctance to pursue ministry, the intimidation I felt at the thought of shepherding young souls in the Christian faith, and my desperate need for discipleship in the area of pastoral ministry. Cliff graciously countered all my objections and assured me that he would actively mentor me in my role of middle school pastor. He also suggested that I begin as an intern since I had no experience and much to learn and told me that youth ministry is an excellent place for a young man to gain experience and determine whether or not he is called to vocational pastoral work. So after only two month's at P. J.'s house, I packed up my jeep with all my earthly possessions and moved to the Bay Area.

The Lord used the next four and a half years of pastoral work to not only confirm my call to vocational ministry, but to teach me the value of hard work, the importance of discipleship, and my vital need for humility. I was also blessed during this time to meet Amy, an intelligent, beautiful, winsome, competent woman who would not only become my wife, but my perfect complement. Knowing that I needed someone who was patient, compassionate, sympathetic, and sensitive to others, the Lord provided a woman who balanced my many weaknesses with her many strengths (Genesis 2:18).

Seminary, Adoption, and Beyond

About two years after we were married, it became clear that if I were going to pursue a life of pastoral ministry, seminary would need to be the next step. So, August 2007, we loaded a moving truck and drove 2,500 miles to Louisville, Kentucky so that I could pursue a M.Div. (Masters of Divinity) at *The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary*. After two years in the program, it became progressively clearer that I should pursue a Ph.D. for the sake of future usefulness in the Church and in the seminaries.

After a seven-year journey (three years for the M.Div. and four years for the Ph.D.), I completed my formal theological training.

Our time in Louisville was rich as we met many new friends, served in various capacities in our church, enjoyed the local culture, worked several different jobs, and learned in a deeper way to rely upon the Lord and upon each other. Our trust in Christ was tested most intensely during two adoptions.

After four years in Louisville, we found ourselves on a plane to Ethiopia to adopt our first child—a little boy not even eleven months old. Our path to adoption, however, had been paved with significant difficulty and mingled with some sorrow. Nevertheless, God's sovereign kindness prevailed and we not only brought home a little boy from Africa, but three years later we boarded another plane—this time to the Republic of China—to pick up our second little boy.

Immediately after we arrived home with our second son, we started packing all our earthly possessions in order to move back to the San Francisco Bay Area. I had recently accepted a full-time pastoral position in Sunnyvale, and I needed to report to work within two months. From rebel, to over-zealous Christian, to struggling disciple, to husband, daddy, pastor, and professor, the Lord has graciously guided my every step despite my sin and many weaknesses and failings. His sovereign care brought me from condemnation to salvation, from death to life, from a life of futility to a life of purpose and joy. A sweet work, indeed!