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God Told Me, "You Need to Help Him"

Although it has been several years, I can still hear those words in my mind just as clearly as if they were spoken yesterday. I'll always remember that day, January 20th, 1992 (Martin Luther King day), when I came face-to-face with the Triune God who cares deeply for his children in need.

Nan and I were living in Pasadena, California at the time. I worked for a large bank in Beverly Hills, and it was a holiday so I was enjoying an unstructured day in beautiful Southern California. I had the top down on my sports car and was headed up Lake Avenue, one of the most heavily traveled streets in Pasadena. As I approached Ralph's grocery store I noticed a young man in his late-twenties carrying a large (probably five feet by five feet) sign overhead with the words "Will Work For Food." That in itself wasn't all that out of the ordinary; after all, there were many homeless living in and around the city. What was extraordinary was the size of his sign and his family sat in the grass near the sidewalk with smaller signs that said the same thing.

As I drove by I felt a tinge of guilt. Here I was headed to the local bookstore to search for some Bible reference materials, and this man and his family didn't have enough money to feed themselves. Then it happened: I heard a very clear and distinct voice in my mind, just as if there were someone sitting in my car next to me, "You need to help him." Immediately, a little startled, I retorted back, "I can't help him, I don't have any money on me." Immediately, the response came back to me: "You have your checkbook, you can take them into the store and buy whatever they need." I realized I didn't have a comeback for that, so I relented and said, "Okay, I'll head on to the bookstore and if he is still there when I return I'll stop."

The bookstore was further down the road, almost to Altadena, and I must have been in the store for at least 45 minutes before I checked out. As I headed back home, I almost forgot about the interaction until I got nearer and my heart started pounding. There, in the same spot was this young man pacing back and forth with large sign overhead. How many others had driven by without stopping, I wondered? As I pulled into the grocer parking lot my heart started pounding more heavily. I remembered thinking, almost giving myself a pep talk, you've stood before large congregations before and spoken at ease, how can this be much different? I remember thinking I didn't want to say anything that would hurt him, and I literally didn't know what to say. I turned off the ignition, got out of the car and started walking toward him, heart still pounding. I can still remember the quick prayer, "Father, you got me into this, give me the words to say." As I approached him, his clear blue eyes met mine, and he put his sign down. Still not knowing what to say I opened my mouth and out came the words, "My name is Craig. I want to help."

I'll never forget the look in his eyes. It was as if they were saying, "I can't believe this is happening." I noticed relief on his face. He told me his name was Pat. After putting their signs in the trunk of the car we walked toward the store and he shared that he was a pipefitter and had been out of work for six months. His wife told me their son and daughter's name was Matthew and Sandy. After we got inside I told him to get whatever they needed and I'd hang out near the magazine rack. I told him to take their time, that I didn't have anywhere else to be that day.

After awhile they returned with a full cart. He said he tried to keep it to just a minimum of what they needed. We headed toward the checkout together. As we were waiting in line, we looked at each other in a moment of awkward silence. He spoke first and I'll never forget what he said: "This morning I woke up and we didn't have any food left in the house. I looked up and said, if You're still up there, we need Your help. It's obvious that He still is, because you came along. Furthermore, I know I'm going to beat this. When I get back to work I want to go out and find someone to help just like you helped us."

As I reflect today on Pat's words, I recognize a few things that I didn't know that day. First, when God deals with us face-to-face and answers our prayers in the intimate way He answered Pat's, we can't help but be touched in a way we'll never forget. Further, when we accept God's love and the ministry of His Son through others, we feel a desire to perpetuate it and share it with others in the way He did with us. Pat didn't say what he said in the checkout line out of a sense of duty, or anything he owed me. We didn't know each other, and would probably never see each other again. He simply felt a desire to share with others the way God shared with Him (and he felt it in his being). Secondly, I felt just as blessed that day (and still do, reflecting on the experience now almost eighteen years later) to participate in what Jesus did, even though it was at first a rather frightening experience. Jesus has chosen to include us when he ministers to others. He doesn't do it alone, and we don't do it without him. Finally, today I recognize that God has this love for ALL humanity, believers and non-believers alike, and comes to our side in time of need, just as he did for Pat, even though Pat probably didn't have any idea at the time who he was in Christ. Included...without a clue.

On that day, back in 1992, God said, "You need to help him," and it was the Triune God who *did* help Pat and his family with my participation. I didn't have a grasp on all the theology behind it as I might today, but I kept the receipt from the grocer, and I still have it in my journal, because I knew I came face-to-face with my Creator in a way I never had before. His voice continues today in each of us. Listen, and participate.

~ Craig Kuhlman