

Perfect Timing



Most of my writing projects start with a story. Or a very vague idea. I rarely see the fullness of a thought from the front end—I have to begin to talk my way into it, through it and out the backside. Even when it’s finished, I rarely know what to call it. Strangely, in the very early, early stages of this project—before words fell to the page in rough notes—I had a title.

You have to understand, historically I have resisted titling things. It’s never felt right to me; but in this case, I liked the title. It was easy to remember and summarized the whole of what I was trying to say.

What I didn’t realize was that the title was polarizing and catalytic. People reacted to the simple, four-word sentence, albeit in radically different ways. Some chuckled. Others rolled their eyes. Some found it incendiary, as they raised an eyebrow and asked in a harsh tone, “Are you saying He wants to kill mine?” A few quietly whispered, “He killed mine too...”

Does Jesus want to kill your church? I have no idea.

Frankly, this book isn’t about your church...or at least, not in my mind. Perhaps it is in yours. This isn’t a template for what God wants to do in your specific congregation. It’s a set of reflections

on what He did in our situation and what my take-aways were from that experience. If some find meaning for their own story in mine, that's a wonderful thing. At the same time, if some reject my story out of fear that it will become theirs, I would hope they just read it quietly, in the dark of night if necessary, with an open heart. I'd rather you learn at my expense than your own. I've already paid for the lessons.

I've always found it helpful to interpret my own story in retrospect rather than in real time. In the moment, while the feelings are the strongest, they're often the least balanced. I cannot react with Spock-like coolness to the sting of rejection, or even the insincere praise of men. It takes me awhile to internalize, reflect, pray, and feel things accurately. This sort of processing has served me well. Knowing how I am wired, God has always provided me with milestones, so that I can glance over my shoulder and see in retrospect what I could not see in the moment.

This book is about what I could not see in the moment. It's about learning to live with disappointment, trusting God's sovereignty, and believing that He meant it when He said He works all things together for good. My journey to this perspective did not happen overnight, or even in one extended season, but rather in a series of moments that collectively changed the way I think about the past.

One Christmas Eve we went to the prayer room as we try to do for a while each Christmas Eve. We are part of a community of believers who maintain a 24/7 prayer and worship meeting. For more than eleven years, instrumentalists and intercessors have played, sung, and prayed the Scriptures through the day and night. It's hard to explain the value of cumulative prayer, but it makes for a sacred space.

It's a wonderful place on that holy evening—often fairly empty, one musician and a scattering of people singing a song for a Savior on the night we remember His birth. I'd like to tell you

how in tune I was with the majesty of it, but I was in my nearly annual funk a day or two early.

Most years between Christmas and New Year, I would dip into a mild depression. It's not the dark night of the soul. It's more like the frustrated spot of the middle-aged guy. The spot would take a few variations from year to year, but it revolved around this thought: Am I happy with what I've accomplished this year? And invariably, year after year, I wasn't. Going into each winter, I approached the end of the year with a jumble of unrealized expectations, and the knowledge that they were unrealized largely because I had fallen short of my own goals. I'd start staring off into space around Thanksgiving, and by the time I hit late December I was overwhelmed with a hodgepodge of would've, should've, could've thoughts weighing on me. Whatever I'd done any given year, it was never enough.

The needle of the soul-o-meter was dipping left that evening as I faced the ending of another year that didn't turn out like I'd hoped. The book that I'd talked so much about writing was not yet published, or even started, for that matter. We were selling our house, but the house we were buying was in unlivable condition, having been empty for years. As a result, we were staying in a borrowed house, and it would be many cold, dark months before we would walk into our own home. I had transitioned from a significant role in a ministry to what felt like a hanger-on, the team member who would not go away but didn't really have any authority or duties either. A good bit of my identity had been stripped away that year, and while I felt I knew who I was, I also believed I was the only person on earth who did.

I felt dislocated, unknown, tired, and more than a little sorry for myself. Okay, a lot sorry for myself.

As I stood to the side of the prayer room, holding my three-month-old daughter, my back against the wall in more ways than one, I got gut-level honest with the Lord. Whispering my confession

in prayer, I told Him everything. “I’m not happy with what I’ve done this year...I’m so disappointed. I’m so disappointed.”

I looked down for a moment at Anna, asleep in my arms. She was completely unaware of the wrenching of my soul. She had three concerns in life—a clean diaper, a warm place to sleep, and a bottle. Presently I was meeting two of those three and I could pull a bottle out of the diaper bag if necessary. She was perfectly content.

In a moment, I heard the Whisper. I’ve heard it before. I actually think it speaks quite often, but I’m usually too busy to take notice. It’s not an audible voice, though I’d love it to be. Though technically silent, it echoed within me.

“I know you’re not happy with what you’ve done this year.”

I had to confess I was not, although God knowing this was not necessarily a sign of omniscience on His part. Anyone who’s ever taken a sophomore college class on body language could tell by the slump of my shoulders that this was not an up moment for me.

The Whisper reiterated, **“I know you’re not happy with what you’ve done this year...but what do you think about what I’ve done?”**

What followed was a palpable, awkward silence. I was troubled by this statement, but too smart to answer quickly. The Voice was comfortable with the silence—He had no compulsion to say any more. He could say more with silence than I could with all the words in the world. What did I think about what He had done this year? He had enjoyed a very good year.

I glanced down at my gorgeous daughter, a perfect Japanese-Thai-Caucasian blend, and then across the room at her twin sister in her mother’s arms. Hot tears began to drop down off my checks onto her blanket. The memories of adopting the twins began to swirl through my head, followed by a myriad of things that His hand had done in the past year. Babies born. Friendships formed. Vision dropping like stars into our dreams at night.

Then it hit me. We didn't do everything we wanted to this year, but He certainly did everything He wanted.

We often measure the seasons in our life by what we hoped for, what we did, what we failed to do, and whether or not our plan worked. Especially in ministry, with souls on the line, being less than the stellar success that we prayed for, hoped for, and budgeted for seems like failure more bitter than death. This sort of thinking strips away the sovereignty of God and places every hope for success and blame for failure on what we could not possibly accomplish. It also misses the point that God is always at work, even in our shortcomings. Even in our supposed failures. It fails to acknowledge that our failings are the rich seedbed of opportunity for His greatness to be revealed.

That fateful Christmas Eve, even standing in the prayer room holding my daughter, I was so consumed with what I wanted to do and didn't that I was looking past His rich leadership and provision in my life. I was right that a book had not been written, but I had two daughters who were not on my radar, my master plan, or my to-do list the previous January. We adopted them in a whirlwind thirty-six hour adventure that I've outlined in a prior book, *The Spirit of Adoption*. It was a miracle—everyone said so, and we knew it to be true. Nevertheless I had stumbled through a year thinking I was missing the mark, while God was at work revealing His true purpose for this season. I was grouching about missing a writing deadline, and God had granted me authority and responsibility for two human souls that would never die. I'd missed more than a writing deadline—I'd missed what God was doing entirely.

I vowed that night that I wouldn't live another year like the last. If the hand of God was at work in all things, then I wanted to learn to see the hand day by day. I wanted to train myself to perceive Him in real time, even when things didn't go as I planned. I wanted to live with a grateful heart, knowing that the summary of my life would not be what I did but rather what He did in my proximity, which I could neither cause nor thwart.

God is forever writing our story, and He gives us the dignity of being able to introduce characters that occasionally wrinkle, but not alter, the plot. Often we think we've done something that permanently changes the trajectory of what might have been if we'd only been more obedient or pious. He smiles at this. He knows how many pages He has left before He needs to bring resolve, and He knows that it's going to be okay.

Further complicating things, God rarely writes in a linear fashion. Linear stories that move from character introduction to conflict to resolution in less than thirty minutes are products of a television generation. Real life—God life—doesn't work that way. Characters step on stage or fall off stage at inopportune times. It often seems that there are more twists than plot. At times, we think we're living a two hour movie, only to find out it's a mini series. More often than not, we're not even able to articulate the conflict accurately because of our own misperceptions of the situation. Yet God continues to write, all the while developing characters around us and character within us.

I'm going to save you a little thinking and give you a few indicators of what you'll discover about me in this book.

In the moment, I rarely fully know what God is doing. I try—really, I do—but I'm almost incapable of stepping back and seeing the long view that God takes. His answers are always more complicated, more magnificent, and more character-building than I would have expected (and sadly, often more character building than I would have chosen). Nevertheless, just because I can't always perceive what God is doing at the moment doesn't mean I can't see His hand in the past, and use that information to reconcile my expectations with my reality.

While much of my family's story feels like random chance, God focused on moving people and events in a manner that seemed like a model to test an elaborate chaos theory. Chaos theory is the idea that the smallest event in a complex system can significantly alter big events far from the original happening. The

classic illustration is a butterfly flapping its wings in China and starting a chain of events that results in a hurricane off the coast of Florida.

We erroneously believe that life simply happens to us and God helps us cope like some supernatural responder to the Serenity Prayer. God isn't just in the coping business. He is in control of everything. He utilizes what feels like small and insignificant things far from us to start people and resources into movement, only to reach us at our specific moment in need. We wonder if help is coming at all—and little do we know that the help has already been set in motion. If only we could learn to trust for the help before we see it.

A few years ago, some bad planning and confusing tax laws for ministers left us in the strange position of having had a low income and incredibly high tax burden. I am reticent to even mention the specifics, because everyone's idea of "high tax burden" is somewhat different, but the number was significant enough that it bears mentioning. When April 15th rolled around, we owed \$9,700.

We were stunned. At the time, we had four children and a meager income. We swallowed hard, looked at the bill, scrounged up every dollar we had, and subtracted. It left about \$9,700. It wasn't that we couldn't pay it all—we couldn't pay any of it! We did what every good red-blooded American might do. We filed an extension and started to pray.

The extension gave us until October 15th of that year. We felt that surely something would break before then. We were so confident that I don't remember praying about it much until late that summer, when October 15th seemed just around the corner. Into September, I grew very spiritual, praying more and more and more. I reminded God that we needed it, reminded Him that we were His children, and reminded Him that if we were to end up on the street eating Funyons, it was going to be a poor reflection on Him as a father. All these prayers gained me nothing but stress.

By September 15th, I was no longer the mighty man of faith and power. I was a wreck. For the next week I didn't eat much, I couldn't sleep, and I agonized in prayer. I remember specifically praying that mantra prayer of the lost cause: "Oh God, Oh God, Oh God." It turns out He actually hears that prayer.

On September 22nd, around 11 a.m., I was in the prayer room sweating bullets. I was pacing. I was praying. I was pleading and interceding. Suddenly, I heard the Lord in a way I had not in a long time—certainly not in relation to this issue. I heard His voice resound in my spirit. Often we've said, "We'd do anything just to hear one word from the Lord..." and I did. He said, **"Stop."** I immediately stopped, but it was more out of perplexity than any sort of obedience.

"Stop?" I thought. "What could that mean?" The first thing that came to mind was Occam's Razor. First year philosophy students will remember Occam's Razor as a philosophical axiom. It declares that "given a multitude of solutions, the simplest is most commonly correct." I applied this axiom and came to reason that the Lord was telling me...stop. So I did. I drove home from the prayer meeting and told Kelsey, "The Lord spoke—and He told me to stop asking. My assumption is that He's got it taken care of." It should be noted that there was nothing concrete to indicate this was true—only the word "stop."

A week later, I received a card from a long-time friend in another city. It read, "Dear Randy and Kelsey, I'm writing to tell you that we are sending a check along shortly. Recently our son was hospitalized. When the bill arrived, I opened it and began to thank the Lord that we had good health insurance. The Lord spoke to me and told me to send the amount of the bill to a missionary who may not have any..."

Kelsey and I began to rejoice, even as we wondered, "Uh, how much?" Days went by with no word. Then October 2nd, we got an email telling us to expect the check to come from a specific entity. It also said, "It will be in the amount of \$10,000 and arrive in two

to two and a half weeks.” We rejoiced—but started counting days. The IRS commitment was due the 15th. The check was scheduled to arrive between the 16th and the 20th. We were not sure that the IRS would be so understanding.

Miraculously, October 8th, the \$10,000 check arrived. It cleared our bank on October 15th. We wrote a \$9,700 check to the IRS and another for \$250 to the tax preparer, and raced them both to the post office. Later we noticed in the bank paperwork that accompanied the check was a notation that it had been ordered on September 22nd—the very day that the Lord had told me to stop.

God, in His infinite wisdom, set the perfect storm in motion, like a butterfly flapping its wings in China might cause a storm in the Caribbean. He sent a hospital bill to a woman who did not need to pay it, on the exact day that it needed to speak to her about giving finances to us in order that it could make its way through the byzantine banking system to hit our bank and be available on the day we would need it. The fact that He spoke the word “stop” to me was simply the icing on the cake. He didn’t want His children to concern themselves one day too long. He had it under control, even when the entire situation looked out of control.

Situations like this have built my faith in God’s leadership, even when I wasn’t sure what He was doing. Even once we knew the money was coming, we weren’t sure it would arrive in time. From beginning to end, it would have been easy to wonder if even Jesus knew what He was up to. It was all too nerve wracking to possibly be God’s perfect plan. If deliverance is coming, what possible advantage would there be in it coming later? Why not now?

You may be reading this, politely nodding, and muttering, “Yes, yes, great story...but when did Jesus kill your church?”

That will come in subsequent chapters. Before you can even begin to think about Jesus killing your church, you have to believe that Jesus’ timing, will, actions, and favor are in remarkable synchronicity with His master plan. He doesn’t do anything—promote or demote, give increase or take back—without it fitting

exactly into history where He wants it, at a strategic place where He's working for our good.

Trust me. I'm speaking from experience. If He kills your church, His timing will be perfect.