**The Long, Winding Road**

**By Chester Mitchell**

These were old soldiers. They hadn't fallen in battle, but something worse had happened. They'd been forgotten. If you've ever had that moment when you allowed the question "Why am I doing this?" to linger on the stage of your mind, you can probably relate.

Once smooth and supple, the skin on their faces was now permanently wrinkled. They walked slowly, shoulders bent from years of long, arduous travel from village to village. Their once-muscular legs were now tired, and their calloused feet were beautiful only because they had carried the Gospel. Like Isaiah said, "How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of the messenger who brings good news" (Isaiah 52:7—NLT).

They had faithfully served God and their calling on the African continent. After many years of ministry, they had finally decided that their work was completed. Aged, tired, and worn, they packed their sparse belongings, said their final farewells, and boarded a ship for the long voyage home to America.

One of the passengers on board the ship was none other than celebrated American President Teddy Roosevelt, who was also returning to New York. During the long voyage home, they watched as people made a great fuss over the president. Everyone wanted to have a picture taken with Mr. Roosevelt. It seemed everyone was a friend! But no one had a clue that two of heaven's elite "special forces" were among them. They had walked courageously with God on the sun-parched soil of a distant continent and left God's kingdom stronger. This was their last trip home. There would be no going back.

As the ship approached the iconic New York City harbor, the sound of the band could be heard over the ship's blaring horn as throngs of people descended on the pier. As the music played and hats were waved and supporters screamed their adoration, the president was welcomed home in a manner befitting the head of a great nation.

Meanwhile, the welcome for the elderly missionary couple was nonexistent. As they disembarked, they scanned the crowds with weary eyes, hoping to see someone they recognized. A few times, they thought someone was waving at them, but it turned out that the greetings were for others. Though they'd sent word of their return, no one had come to welcome them.

Slowly but surely, the reality of the moment sank into their hearts like the massive heavy anchor of the ship. No one. No one had come to meet them, to welcome them, to express gratitude for two people who had devoted the best years of their lives to missionary work. Over time, the people who knew them had died, some were too aged to make it to the dock and others were simply too busy to welcome home some of heaven's heroes for the last time. At that moment, it seemed to them that not only had their friends forgotten about them but that God had also forsaken them.

After gathering their belongings, they found a hotel room. Sensing his wife's disappointment and not knowing how to deal with his own, the man found a corner and knelt to pray. The tears flowed as he struggled to find the words to express to God that after serving His kingdom for so many years, the least He could have done was to have a few people on hand to welcome them home.

In just a few moments he received his answer and rose to his feet with a smile.

"What did the Lord say that has caused you so much peace?" his wife asked.

He looked tenderly at her. "We are not home yet!"

Walking with God is the journey of a lifetime. Some races are sprints, requiring a short burst of energy, but the Christian life is different. In short races, the runner begins with the knowledge that, win or lose, the race will be over quickly. But for the marathon runner, stamina will be required, the ability to go the distance. Because there will be moments of loneliness, fear, anxiety, pain, and stumbling.

Walking with God is about a number of things. First, it's about making a lifelong commitment to following Christ. Second, it's about dealing with the distractions of life. Third, it's about intimacy, a transformation that happens when we walk with Him, converse with Him and, in the end, become like Him. Fourth, walking with God is about not having answers but nonetheless remaining committed to the calling God has entrusted you with. Finally, it's about finishing (on God's terms) your divine assignment just before you step into eternity.

As I write this piece, the big story coming out of Hollywood is about another celebrity couple who, after spending an estimated $10 million on a lavish wedding, have decided to divorce after only 72 days of marriage! It goes without saying that few of us are shocked anymore—inside or outside the church—when people walk away from sacred vows after a short "trial" period. The narcotic of selfishness, self-preservation, and self-gratification has numbed us.

Walking with God is about going the distance. It's depicted in the deeply lined faces of the elderly couple you see in the park. Their relationship began in the springtime of passion long ago, but then came the scorching and balmy days of summer. Those were the days when their relationship was tested. Those were the difficult days—days of frustration, days of failure, days of wondering if they'd made a mistake when they said, "I do."

The lines in their faces also tell of the fall, when the fresh leaves of spring turned a thousand shades of brown and purple and yellow. Those were the days when the night air turned chilly and the winds came calling loudly. Those were the days when they began to slow down a bit but developed a deeper appreciation for each other. "He has been there for me." "She knows me better than anyone in the world and yet she still gazes at me just as she did the first time we held hands." "As he held my hand when the doctor told me that I had breast cancer, he whispered, 'No matter what happens, we will get through this together.'"

When the winter comes, it reminds them that the end is near. But these are the sweetest of days, days spent with the one you have learned to truly love. We look forward to the eternal part of the journey, to meeting again "over there."

Walking with God is about "selective vision." It's choosing who and what you will focus on. Along the journey, you will pass many a place where you make the same decision you made earlier: "I will not be distracted." Distractions are detours disguised as shortcuts to your destination. Turns out they lead to the wrong destination.

These are the points along the way where you realize that God has not called on you to explain every bad thing that you see or hear or experience. But how do you continue walking with God when a child you had hoped would embody everything you believed in throws his or her faith away in one seemingly senseless moment? How do you continue to walk with God when you hear about another respected politician or priest or pastor who has made a horrible mistake in judgment? How do you continue to walk with God when you finally realize that one shameful night that you'd chained away in the forgotten chamber of your life broke loose long ago and tainted every pure relationship you've tried to embrace?

Maybe this moment finds you temporarily distracted by disappointment in your child, in yourself, or in God. The people of faith in the Bible were not spared the painful chapters of the journey, but they continued walking with God through them.

The Book of Ruth was written for people committed to walking with God and refusing to be distracted. In it, Naomi leaves Bethlehem with her handsome husband, Elemelech, and their sons, Mahlon and Chilion. The last road sign indicated that Moab was ahead and Judah was behind them. Who would have guessed that in a short period of time, their hopes and expectations would give way to the cold, dark waters of grief? Who would have guessed that Ruth's husband and their sons would soon be dead?

What do you do if you're Naomi after the third funeral? Do You walk away from your faith? Do you give in to the numbing demon of depression? Or do you pretend that everything is OK and keep your mask securely glued to your grief? Naomi made the strategic decision to retrace her steps to Bethlehem. She came home "empty"- the only bright spot was that her Moabite daughter-in-law chose to return with her—but little did she know that God was guiding her steps. How could she have known that Ruth would marry the wealthy Boaz, that Ruth would walk into divine destiny and find a place in the genealogy of the Messiah?

From walking with God, I've learned that He saves the best chapters of the story until after you've walked with Him around the painful cures and navigated steep precipices.

Then the women said to Naomi, "Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without a close relative, and may his name be famous in Israel! And may he be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law, who loves you, who is better to you than seven sons, has borne him" (Ruth 4:14-15—NKJV).

It is in the crucible of a lifetime of walking with God through certainty and uncertainty—through good and bad decisions—that God leads us into His Will. Just ask Naomi and Ruth!

If you're walking with God today, you may be dealing with pain. God has not forsaken you—He will never forsake you. If you began with a commitment to walk with Him, He is committed to making sure you finish the journey on your long, winding road.

A STEP ON THE JOURNEY:

A PRAYER:

Dear Heavenly Father, lately I have found myself wondering about my journey with You. I know that I loved You in the spring, but so many unexpected things have happened since the seasons have changed. I ask You to give me the strength to keep walking with You. Even though I do not know what the future holds, it is enough if You will keep holding my hand. Amen.

TAKE TIME TO COMMIT THESE VERSES TO MEMORY:

"What shall we say about such wonderful things as these? If God is for us, who can ever be against us? ... Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death? ...No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us" (Romans 8:31,35,37—NLT).

And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today, nor our worries about tomor¬row—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:38-39—NLT.

LONG, WINDING ROAD

When I made my start for Heaven, I could only find one way,

A road that led me through the mountains and the valleys,

A road not many folks could take, when I started out

on my Journey, I left many, many miles behind me, miles of tears

and pain, Miles of storms and rain, this road's been rough,

But I again would choose the same....

CHORUS

Long, Winding road, keep leading me, up ahead I see a sign,

Pointing straight ahead to victory,

I know I must be traveling right, I remember passing by Calvary,

Yes I do, Yes I do,

Although it's dusty and it's old, for years it's borne

the traveler's load, someday this road will turn to Gold.

There are times when the rocks hurt my feet, my body burns from

the sweat and heat, my strength completely drains, and my face

Marks the pain, my back is bent from the strain,

You see, I could turn back now, but the road is still there,

and every mountain that I've climbed, I again would have to bear,

So I really can't turn back, some may be using my tracks,

I see one more bend and it may be this road's end.

—Johnny Cook

The above article, “The Long, Winding Road,” is the twenty-fifth chapter from the book, The Gravel Road to Heaven by Chester Mitchell.

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