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FOREWORD BY
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THIRSTING
FOR
LIVING
WATER

FINDING ADVENTURE
and PURPOSE *in* GOD'S
REDEMPTION STORY



InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

Taken from *Thirsting for Living Water: Finding Adventure and Purpose in God's Redemption Story* by Michael J. Mantel.
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Published by InterVarsity Press,
Downers Grove, IL. www.ivpress.com.

Reflection 1

MY FATHER LEFT AN ADVANCE DIRECTIVE

*Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance,
the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.*

For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat,

I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink,

I was a stranger and you invited me in,

I needed clothes and you clothed me,

I was sick and you looked after me,

I was in prison and you came to visit me.

MATTHEW 25:34-36

MY DESCENT INTO the dark night of the soul began with the death of my father.

My father's death was not untimely. He was ninety-three years old and had lived a good life. My mother had gone before him, and he was in pain. He was ready to be with God, if for no other reason than to be free of the catheter he was forced to use late in life. Nonetheless, the death of one's father always inspires a kind of pensive woe, conjuring memories and mixed emotions.

My father and I did not always get along when I was young. He was always at work, and he was hard for a child to know. I felt him to be

distant, uninvolved in my life. I thought he was harsh, demanding, and did not care about things children care about.

Although all of that could be said of my relationship with my human father, all of it could also be said of my relationship with my heavenly Father. Before this story is all over, I would love both of those fathers, leave both of them, and invite both of them back into my life.

This story is about honoring my father’s advance directive in the midst of so much confusion as he approached his death. It is about honoring what he wanted of me, even when it was not easy. As you have probably already guessed, this reflection is also about honoring the “advance directive” our heavenly Father left us, even when it isn’t easy.

As you read this story, I invite you to recall a challenging or confusing time in your life when God’s word in Scripture offered you comfort or clarity.



It hurt to see my father’s mouth so dry. His teeth were just dry bones now. Never again would they grace us with a smile. His lips were turning black.

My dad’s world had been closing in on him for years now. He had once defied Nazis by offering refuge to Jewish neighbors during World War II. He once crossed a vast ocean alone to get from war-torn Holland to the land of opportunity. Now he was confined to a shrinking body that lost moisture with every breath. For the rest of his life now he would shrink in weight, hydration, and vigor until he died under the hum of the fluorescent hospital lights.

My wife, Natalie, and I were at lunch with my mentor and Living Water’s cofounder Gary Loveless and his wife, Stephanie, when we got the call. My father was on his way to the hospital. By itself, this was not a cause for immediate concern. Dad loved a good ambulance trip to the hospital. The lights, the wild ride on a reclining bed in a

climate-controlled truck, being chauffeured, carried, wheeled around to meet people with fresh new faces—this is the most exhilarating thrill available to a ninety-three-year-old man in his condition.

Only this time he was in that ambulance because he had suffered the stroke that would take his life. We later learned that he had been transferred en route to a special stroke unit ambulance to begin treatment sooner for this life-threatening event. When we got to the hospital, they called us into the emergency room for questions.

My dad had insisted that Natalie draft a set of legal documents that included an advance directive to provide clear instructions to implement during the very confusing and emotional time when death is pending. He had an advance directive, but there were gray areas. His wishes were clear, but there were circumstances he could not have foreseen. The doctor explained the situation and said it was our decision—did we want to intervene or let him struggle on his own to the end?

We needed to act fast if we wanted to intubate and feed him through an IV. The clock was ticking. I felt the burden of Dad's brain cells dying with every passing moment as I called my out-of-town brothers. An eternity passed from one phone ring to the next. I was relieved once we were all on the line. We decided it would best honor Dad's personal wishes, and his written request, to let nature take its course. We decided to let him die.

The doctors didn't say it like that. Had they been Dutchmen like my father they would have spoken plainly, saying what they meant with no prelude or fancy terms, but that is not how physicians talk. They spoke in what seemed to me to be code. Everything spoken in a hospital becomes an exercise in discernment. Words for conditions and procedures are foreign, euphemisms abound, time is scarce, and there is no Rosetta Stone to help you sort things out. You just do your best in the midst of all the gray uncertainty.

Judging by what the doctors had said, I thought my dad would die within the hour. I did not know if he could hear me, but I told him I

loved him. He held onto my arm, which I took as a sign that he was still there. I told him everything I wanted to say. Then we sat in silence. Minutes went by, then hours. Nurses performed their routines. Fluorescent lights buzzed. Other patients shuffled about. I wanted to know what was going to happen, but the emergency room is a busy, high-pressure place, and when the staff members have time to answer questions, it isn't always clear what they are saying. You sort things out as you go.

After some time, Dad was moved to a regular room and we decided to go home and get some sleep. We came back the next day, and our time together was the same as the day before. Realizing that this may take time, we resolved to visit him every day. We sang old hymns to him. We talked to him. We read psalms to him. I began to feel guilty for letting him die this way; doubt crowded in.

Day after day his mouth dried out. Every time he exhaled, a little moisture was released into the sterile hospital air. Days had passed since his last drink of water. It seemed to me that dehydration would play a role in taking his life, which was ironic. In my role with Living Water International, my vocation is to quench both physical and



Figure 1.1. Holding my father's hand as he slowly passed away

spiritual thirst, but I felt useless for that here. I felt a pressure slowly building with each passing day. Time gave rise to uncertainty. I no longer knew if I was making the right calls or the wrong ones. I had no idea what was going on inside my father's head or his heart. I also had no idea what he needed spiritually, and we had promised not to intervene by meeting his physical needs. That promise was more difficult to keep with each day that passed as Dad's lips blackened over his dry tombstone teeth.

I had no way to know what he could think or feel. I did not know if he was hungry as we gave him nothing to eat, or thirsty as we gave him nothing to drink. I did not know if he felt alone when we left, or sick, or estranged, or imprisoned in his slowly dehydrating body. To the extent that he could feel anything at all, I saw that my father suffered the same afflictions Christ endured on the cross—hunger, thirst, loneliness, illness, estrangement, and imprisonment.

In those days, I thought a lot about Jesus' teaching about the sheep and the goats. Long ago, Natalie and I had made that passage from Matthew's Gospel a central aspect of our lives, so I had thought about the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew a lot throughout my life. Now those words took on new dimensions.

In his Gospel, Matthew presents twenty chapters of Jesus' teaching and healing building up to a series of discourses that start to feel more serious, more apocalyptic, and more consequential than the ones that came before. Then, the last of those public teachings before Judas betrays Jesus is the one of the sheep and the goats. It is a story about how we treat the thirsty, hungry, naked, sick, lonely, and imprisoned. Those afflictions assumed new poignancy now that I knew my father would suffer them all until his coming death.

In the vivid image of a shepherd sorting sheep from goats, Jesus describes God sorting out the nations at the end of time. Those who fed the hungry, gave water to the thirsty, invited in the stranger, clothed the naked, cared for the sick, and visited the prisoner, he says, will

inherit the kingdom prepared for them since the creation of the world. The others will “go away to eternal punishment” (Matthew 25:46).

It’s harsh. I don’t claim to know exactly what Jesus means, but his language is strong. As his people, Jesus expects us to feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, invite the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and visit the prisoner. When we serve him by serving the people who suffer, we will be invited to enter the kingdom prepared for us since the creation of the world.

Jesus said that when we do those things for the least of our brothers and sisters, we do the same for him. As Natalie and I began to take that teaching to heart, we began to see that for those living on less than two dollars per day, safe drinking water was their most fundamental need. We began to see how safe drinking water empowers people to address other needs—how it is the first step in a staircase that leads to the capacity to reach their God-given potential. More and more people’s access to safe, clean drinking water became our focus as we saw firsthand how access to it not only quenched thirst but also enabled people to grow food, kept them from getting sick, and provided a vital public space where churches could invite strangers into communion. So we dedicated our lives to helping offer a drink to the thirsty—except for the thirsty man in front of us.

Jesus’ teaching that “whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me” is beautiful (Matthew 25:40), but I doubt the disciples appreciated it as they watched their Savior die. Jesus suffered in all those ways on the cross: he was hungry and thirsty—a stranger to this world, rejected by people who had stripped him naked, inflicted suffering beyond any illness, and imprisoned him on a Roman cross. When Jesus said, “I am thirsty,” the disciples probably did not think about quenching their Lord’s thirst by offering a drink to the least of their brothers and sisters (John 19:28). I bet they just looked up, saw a dying man, and had no idea what to do.

I had no idea what to do for my dying father. I was glad I had invited my dad to live with us at the end of his life. I was glad I got to know him as an adult. It was not until later in my life that he embodied compassionate fatherhood for me. In those later years, he became my teacher and my confidant when life was difficult. He was a good counselor who could strip away distraction and get right to the heart of a matter. He had given me life. Now I just watched as day after day his lips darkened, his breathing became more difficult, and I felt more out of sorts, wondering whether I had done the right thing.

Then he passed away.

“I am thirsty,” the apostle John records Christ’s words from the cross (John 19:28). “It is finished,” and with that Jesus bowed his head and gave up his spirit (John 19:30). That was how it was with my father too. He was thirsty, then it was finished—for me, it was a relief.

Those days in the hospital had been a bewildering blur of emotion, jargon, confusion, farewell, and decisions I felt unequipped to make. With the clarity of hindsight, I now see that I can look back on those days without regret because *I knew exactly what my father wanted*. Not only that, I realized long afterward what a privilege it was to be by his side in his pain, to be the one entrusted to carry out his advance directive in real time.

In this case, I knew what my father wanted because he had created an advance directive. In the midst of fear, doubt, confusion—all along—I really knew what he wanted; I just needed to implement it. I was grateful that he had provided clear, written direction because in the moment it was hard to see what he would have wanted. If I hadn’t had that, every intervention I approved would have led us further from his goal, which was to be free of his body and return to God in peace without unnecessary delay.

We are in the same situation with God. We hear God’s voice sometimes, but other times we don’t. Often, the times we don’t are times when our circumstances, our emotions, our pride, and so many other

things create a subterfuge that makes it difficult to see our way. But he has not left us without an advance directive. He has left us a written record of what our heavenly Father wants us to do. When our judgment is clouded, the Bible will provide clarity.

The Bible is a treasure trove of advance directives from our heavenly Father. God calls each of us into his master plan through his written word. When we are confused or looking for guidance, God speaks to us through Scripture. While each of our calls might be different, the bottom line is that we find out what God wants us to do and then do it.

For Natalie and me, Jesus' words in Matthew 25 had always provided clarity about what God wants us to do: to offer food to the hungry, water to the thirsty, hospitality to the stranger, clothes for the naked, care for the sick, company for the imprisoned—and when we offer those things, we do the same for Jesus himself. As long as there are suffering people on earth, at least some portion of the Christian life must be oriented toward those concerns.

I don't understand this as a burden, but as an opportunity to take my place in the kingdom prepared for me by my Father. As difficult as it was to honor my dad's advance directive, I had been privileged to be the one who sat with him in his last days and hours. He had chosen me to be that person. And God has chosen each of us to carry out his advance directive. Every time I see a person or a community identify where God is at work in the world addressing the needs of his people and joining him in that work, I see them gain vitality, adventure, and meaning.

Now that my father was gone, it was finally time to get back to our own long-neglected lives, including our mission to see Jesus thirsty in the least of our brothers and sisters and to offer them a drink. Before that, though, Natalie needed to go in for that mammogram appointment she had missed while we cared for my father.

Reflect

Mike's father's advance directive offered him clarity and comfort in a difficult time. Our heavenly Father's "advance directive" does the same through Scripture. Mike cites Matthew 25:34-36 as God's "advance directive" asking us to offer food, water, hospitality, clothes, care, and company to those in need. What "advance directive" has God left you in Scripture?

Write

Call to mind a challenging or confusing time when God's "advance directive" through Scripture offered you clarity or peace. Write that story, recording how you felt in that time of need, how the words of Scripture helped, and how you felt afterward.

Share

Share your story with someone you trust and ask them to do the same. Make note of the various ways God reveals what he wants of us through Scripture.

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