

Walking with God

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WALKING WITH GOD

Stories of Life and Faith

William C. Mills



Rollinsford, New Hampshire

Published by Orthodox Research Institute
20 Silver Lane
Rollinsford, NH 03869
www.orthodoxresearchinstitute.org

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Cover photo: Walters Ms. W.592, Gospels. fol. 192b. Jesus's entry into Jerusalem.

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ISBN: 978-1-933275-68-0

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INTRODUCTION

As a pastor and as a teacher of courses in Bible and Spirituality, I find that most people want to learn more about Jesus and are seeking an authentic Christian faith but are tired of pleasant platitudes or dry dogmatic formulas that are often heard in Sunday sermons: “If you give ten percent of your income to the Church, God will bless you” or “Just pray and you will be okay” or even worse, a long list of do’s and don’ts! People see through these trite messages. They come to church for inspiration and healing, and they leave hungry. They want God to help transform their lives. It is not enough to memorize a list of rules and regulations or even to memorize a collection of scriptural passages. People want to know more about the Bible and how they can live a better life. Even children don’t like to memorize math or spelling rules, they want to see how math works, how formulas are put together and how they can be applied in daily living. The same pertains to the Scriptures. But what to do?

While people may not memorize particular scriptural passages or facts about Jesus, everyone likes a good story. There is nothing better than cuddling up on a cold winter night with a cup of hot tea or cocoa and your favorite book.

Children especially love stories. As soon as the teacher announces that it's story time, they race to the carpet and eagerly wait for the story to begin. They sit in a circle with their eyes wide open mesmerized with princes and princesses, castles, witches and warlocks, wars and weddings, and of course, dragons and adventure. When I was a child, I remember walking to the library with my mother. It was only a five-block walk, but we couldn't get to the library fast enough. We sat there together with other moms and children listening to the librarian read story after story. During those weekly reading programs, I was transported to different worlds, worlds where animals talked or where people could fly. I envisioned a world where children ruled and where we could eat chocolate all day and not get sick. Children know a good story when they hear one, which is why the Harry Potter series continues to be so popular.

Stories convey not just information but also help form our faith. A friend of mine told me a story about growing up in Palestine during the British Mandate period. The family was very poor. Her mom stayed home with her brothers and sisters while her father went to work. One day after work, her father stopped

on his way home and bought something for the family. When he got home, he told his family that he had a surprise for them. He searched through his satchel and put down a shiny red apple on the table.

He looked over to his wife and said, "I think you should have it." She thought for a minute and said, "No, I think the youngest should have it. She is very sickly. She needs the nourishment." My friend's sister, the youngest, said, "No, I think daddy should have it. He works so hard every day, bringing home money to help the family." Then the middle child shouted out, "Maybe daddy can divide the apple into five pieces and we can all taste it." The father and mother looked at each other and smiled. The mother cut the apple into five equal pieces. This story, my friend told me, carried her through some very hard times. She eventually left Palestine and came to America, working as the first female physician in a hospital in Spartanburg, SC. I share this apple story with you as an example of the power of stories, but at the same time now her story becomes your story too. You are free to pass this story onto your friends and family and in that way this story will live on in the minds and hearts of others.

Jesus devoted His entire ministry to telling stories. We call them parables. These parables reveal deep meaning of forgiveness as in the parable of the Prodigal Son. Judgment, as we hear in the Parable of the Talents. Jesus traveled around Galilee telling stories of love, forgiveness, repentance, and community life. He

also taught through His example, healing the sick and the suffering with a the touch of His hand or a simple command like, “Go and wash and be clean.” Jesus was smart too. He used everyday common images to help spread the Good News: shepherds, planting, harvesting, yeast, light, trees and shrubs. When Jesus spoke, everyone could understand. Eventually these stories were written down and collected in four gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Every Sunday we hear a different gospel lesson as a way to learn not just what Jesus did and said but what His words mean for daily living. The gospel contains life-giving words, words that encourage, inspire, reprove, explain, and inform. Each Sunday when we hear stories about Jesus we are being formed and shaped as His disciples.

Walking With God: Stories of Life and Faith are pastoral and practical stories collected throughout the years. As a father, husband, pastor, and teacher, I have both heard and told hundreds of stories. The stories included in *Walking With God* are stories of struggling with what it means to live a Godly life.

Each chapter includes a “Food for Thought” section with a few follow-up reflections for the reader to consider. I have also included some additional scriptural passages for the reader to read on their own. I hope that *Walking with God* becomes a regular resource for prayer, Scripture study, and continuing conversation about living a holy life in Christ. May these stories help you with your walk of faith.

CHAPTER ONE

CARING AND COMPASSION

When He entered Capernaum, a centurion came to Him, appealing to Him and saying, "Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, in terrible distress." And He said to him, "I will come and cure him." The centurion answered, "Lord, I am not worthy to have You come under my roof; but only speak the word, and my servant will be healed." (Matthew 8:5-8).

Two sayings have remained with me throughout my life: you don't know someone until you walk in their shoes and the best training is on-the-job training.

Our college professors tell us that they can only teach us basic theories and methods. They tell us that after graduation, we will enter the real world and learn the rest. They remind us that a college education was limited; we would need to be life-long learners.

The same advice can be said for parenting. One of my good friends once joked, "If God wanted us

to have a parenting manual, He would have given us one!” He’s right. The best way to learn about parenting is to be a parent: changing diapers, helping with homework, waiting in carpool, and attending basketball and soccer games. You learn parenting when you act as a parent.

When we walk in someone else’s shoes, it is supposed to make us more compassionate, more caring, and more sympathetic. When you have sympathy for someone you feel for them, you sit with them in their pain and with their joys. You cannot show sympathy for someone until you walk with them during times of crises and pain.

Matthew tells us that one day Jesus visited Capernaum, a small village on the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee. The name Capernaum means, “the house of comfort.” While in Capernaum, Jesus encountered a Roman Centurion. A centurion was a high-ranking military officer in the Roman army. You might be asking yourself, so what? Jesus healed a lot of people, right? Yes, Jesus did heal a lot of people, but it was not customary for Jewish rabbis to visit Roman households. Most Jews during that time considered the Romans the enemy and when Jesus was seen speaking with this Roman soldier, the villagers would assume that Jesus was a traitor. Talk about being counter cultural! By going to Capernaum, Jesus stretched our limits of love and compassion. It’s easy to love those around us: our family, friends, our next-door neighbors, or those

from our culture or religion. By going to Capernaum, Jesus forced us out of our comfort zone.

Throughout the gospel stories, Jesus stretches our ideas of love and compassion. He goes out of His way and speaks with a Samaritan woman. He eats with the Pharisees and Sadducees. He calls tax collectors like Matthew and Zachaeus. Jesus reaches out to the poor, to the orphan, to the widow, and to the outcast, to all of those whom society has forgotten. The prophets in the Old Testament constantly remind us of this:

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do ***justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*** (Micah 6:8).

Hear this word, you cows of Bashan who are on Mount Samaria, ***who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to their husbands, "Bring something to drink!"*** The Lord God has sworn by his holiness: The time is surely coming upon you, when they shall take you away with hooks, even the last of you with fishhooks. Through breaches in the wall you shall leave, each one straight ahead; and you shall be flung out into Harmon, says the Lord (Amos 4:1-3).

Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be your spoil, and that you may make the orphans your prey! What will you do on the day of punishment, in the calamity that will come from far away? To whom will you flee for help, and where will you leave your wealth, so as not to crouch among the prisoners or fall among the slain? For all this his anger has not turned away; his hand is stretched out still (Isaiah 10:1-4).

Amos, Micah, and Isaiah are very clear. God is not happy when we neglect empathy for the least and the lowest among us. We erect walls and fences. We care only for people within these safe boundaries, yet God is interested in people outside of these boundaries too. A long time ago a priest friend of mine told me that he wanted to start an outreach program in his parish, a food bank for the local community. After he created an outline and details for the program he presented his ideas to the parish council. After reviewing the plans they said, "But Father, we don't want those people hanging around our parish!" My friend was saddened at hearing their response and the parish never started the food bank. Unfortunately, this type of negative response is not uncommon in parish life.

We feel uncomfortable around people from different ethnic, racial, social, or financial backgrounds. It is very easy to withdraw and circle the wagons. We keep people out.

Yet Matthew reminds us that Jesus raised the bar for discipleship. He challenged us to stretch our love and compassion. The odd thing though is that the more we love and the more we care the more we realize we can love and care.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

1. Think of a time when you could have helped someone but didn't. How did you feel afterwards when you realized you had lost a good opportunity to show love and compassion?
2. Have you been in a time of need and someone helped you? What were the specific circumstances? How did it make you feel afterwards?
3. Read: Matthew 5:1–20, John 10:1–18, 2 Corinthians 1:3–14.