

I'm not robot!

audience. PART 1 THE VOICE THAT BRINGS LIFE CHAPTER 1 Sacred Enclosures Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.1 —SOLOMON One fine summer day in 1606, in a grove of towering Sequoias, in a place that would come to be known as California, a tiny seedling poked up through the virgin soil. Drawing energy from the filtered sunlight of the towering sentinals, the infant lifted its miniature arms to the light and warmth that had awakened it. A year later, as the seedling turned sapling, the London Company established the Jamestown settlement in Virginia. A year after that, as the sapling became a young Sequoia, an adventurer named Samuel de Champlain founded Quebec City in New France, a territory that would one day be called Canada. After three more years, when the Sequoia's top was eleven feet above the forest floor, a group of scholars released an elegant English translation of the Bible that would be known as the King James Version. In 1618, when the tree was nearly two stories high, Europe became embroiled in a conflict that history books would one day call The Thirty Years War. As the tree continued to grow, America became a nation, fought a civil war, joined Europe in fighting two world wars, put men on the moon, and suffered at the hands of terrorists on September 11, 2001. Through all of those events, spanning centuries, the seedling became a towering titan of the forest, soaring over 240 feet into the California sunshine. And then, just a couple of years ago, the tree fell to the earth in a thunderous crash. It was the first of Yosemite's magnificent Sequoias to fall in many years, and the Forest Service authorized an investigation. What mysterious force had slain the giant? What would cause such a majestic tree to fall in this way? There had been no windstorms, fires, floods, or lightning strikes. The toppled tree showed no evidence of animal or insect damage. As park rangers and forestry experts examined the downed behemoth, they came to a startling conclusion. Foot traffic. In an interview with CNN, ranger Deb Schweizer explained that foot traffic around the base of the tree over the years had damaged the root system and contributed to the collapse. She added that park officials had now instituted a policy of fencing some of the oldest, largest, and most historically significant trees, "to keep the public from trampling the root systems of these giants." After watching that report, I sat back in my chair. As King Solomon related in the book of Proverbs: "When I saw, I reflected upon it, I looked, and received instruction."2 I thought, Even stalwart and venerable trees that have lived for hundreds of years can't survive when there is no protection—no sacred enclosure around their root systems. What's true for the Sequoias is also true for you and me. We have delicate root systems—more fragile than we would ever imagine—and unless we find a way to protect and nourish those roots, we too will fall. It may be in one great physical, emotional, or moral collapse, or it may be little by little through months and years, gradually weakening our lives, eroding our personalities, killing the essence of who we are and who we would like to become. Believe me, I know. A FRIEND WHO SAVED MY LIFE AND MINISTRY My daily time before the feet of Christ allows the biblical mentors access to me. It brings me face-to-face with others who were discouraged in ministry. That's where I was. So I made appointments with several men who know my story. One was Joseph, who, while doing his best for God, was summarily forgotten for two years in prison. Another was Elijah, who was depressed and despondent. Furthermore there was David, who after returning from battle, found that his family had been taken captive and all his belongings stolen. It was then that he and his men wept until they could weep no more. Ever felt that way? But it was Jeremiah who saved my life. My personal boat had capsized. I had depleted my system until my body's chemistry was exhausted. I had lost my vision and my desire to continue. A low-grade depression enveloped me like a black cloud. I was constantly checking to see if I had enough saved to retire early, run for the border, and be anonymous forever. Through many months of agony, I pruned as much as I could in order to loosen the noose that was tightening around my heart. Open to any reasonable job offers, I struggled to continue my preaching schedule and ministry duties. But one thing I never pruned was my daily devotions. I am unspeakably glad. It saved my future. It was a morning coffee time. I sat with one of my accountability partners: Jeremiah. He sympathized with me as I poured out my heart to him. We had something in common that day. Seemed he had run into the same wall I hit. And I think I found the same end of the rope that he had. I was treading water in the midst of a storm-tossed ocean. It would only be a matter of time before I let go of hope. Jeremiah had been ridiculed, disregarded, and ostracized. Jeremiah had been surrounded by hopelessness and unbelief. Look, they keep saying to me, "Where is the word of the Lord? Let it come now!"3 Jeremiah understood. Jeremiah felt what I felt. I was comforted by his empathy. I felt so fried and discarded. Where are God's promised healing and renewal? I wondered. If they don't come now, what's the use? I was thrashing in a sea of despair, and there had been no help in sight. It was the next verse that saved me. No, it wasn't a magic potion. It was a statement from a friend—gentle but firm. Originally speaking to the Lord, Jeremiah said: "But as for me, I have not hurried away from being a shepherd after You."4 He said it in a way only a friend could. Rough but not coarse. Straight but not wounding. In so many words: You can leave if you want to. But I'm not going to be in a hurry. He called me to be a shepherd. Now, I might be a sick shepherd or a hurting shepherd, but I'm not an exshepherd. You can do what you want to, but as for me, I'm staying with the program. Jeremiah threw me a plank in the middle of that raging sea. Not a full lifeboat, mind you, and I wasn't ashore yet. It was just a plank . . . a plank I held on to, a plank that kept me afloat until the rescue boat arrived. I still had to hang on, but it was what I needed. I guess it was a challenge from one friend to another. Whatever it was, it kept me alive. It saved my ministry. It gave me the strength I couldn't do without. Jeremiah went through so much more than I did, yet he never denounced my struggle as petty or unimportant. Jeremiah understood as only a friend would. Because I had sat with him many times, I had the relationship I needed to hear his advice, his challenge, his love for struggling shepherds like me. I wonder: How many people feel weary, fed up, and ready to cash it all in? How many, like me, have allowed heavy foot traffic to damage their roots? When we do, we're in danger of crashing to the ground. It was a sacred enclosure around my roots that saved me from falling. It was not an absence of stress or of challenge. It was not an absence of problems. It was a sacred enclosure that guarded my foundation and allowed me to keep standing. What kind of foot traffic do you deal with every day? More than you might imagine. Some of us suffer the wear and tear of long daily commutes. We find ourselves responding to unending e-mails, phone calls, text messages, and Blackberry bleeps. Noise. Chatter. Traffic. Crowds. Politics. Talk radio. Telephone. Television. The neighbor's dog. Bills. Worries. Responsibilities. Deadlines. Endless chores. Demanding children. Relational bruises. Foot traffic wears on us. We can't evade most of it, and that's not really the solution anyway. What we need to do is protect the most important part of us . . . that deep down, soulish part of life that links with our Creator. I want to challenge you to develop a lifelong habit that will place a sacred enclosure around the roots of your soul. You can't afford to neglect this, for, as David asks, "If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?"5 We need to hear and heed this most important life lesson. And who would know better about the foundations of human life than the Architect and Builder himself? ONE THING Jesus tells the story of protecting life's root systems in Luke 10:38-42. Now as they were traveling along, He entered a village; and a woman named Martha welcomed Him into her home. She had a sister called Mary, who was seated at the Lord's feet, listening to His word. But Martha was distracted with all her preparations; and she came up to Him and said, "Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to do all the serving alone? Then tell her to help me." But the Lord answered and said to her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things; but only one thing is necessary, for Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her." Both sisters dearly loved Jesus. Imagine how they scurried about their home to get things ready for His arrival. This wasn't just any generic visitor; both Mary and Martha recognized Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah of Israel and the very Son of God. Before they knew it, there He was, coming up the walk, stepping through the door, opening His arms to embrace them. At that point, Mary dropped all her activities and preparations, set her stack of dishes on the counter, and took a seat at Jesus' feet, as close as she could get. Household tasks could wait. Dinner could wait. She had eyes only for Him. She had ears only to catch His every word. Martha, however, saw the job as unfinished, so she kept up her busyness at a fever pitch. She was a veritable whirlwind of multitasking—clattering pots, stirring gravy, baking bread. Her agitation escalated when she saw her idle sister. How could she possibly get it all done alone? Finally the volcanic frustration erupted. Martha interrupted His teaching with an exasperated, "Lord, doesn't it seem unfair to you that my sister just sits here while I do all the work? Tell her to come and help me."6 Luke describes Martha as distracted with her preparations, using a word that literally means "pulled about." We've all been there, haven't we? Yanked from one thing to the next to the next, until we begin to feel like a rag doll. Jesus said to His friend, "Martha, you're bothered about so many things. So worried and distracted." And then He said something truly revolutionary: "Only a few things are necessary, really only one, for Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her."7 What Mary had chosen—her decision to cultivate her relationship with Jesus, above all else—would never be taken from her. Not for the rest of her life. Not for eternity. A sacred enclosure. It's something you choose. WATCH OVER YOUR HEART The choices you make regarding the foundations of your life have eternal implications that go far beyond your life span on earth. As Paul told his young pastor-friend Timothy, "Physical training is good, but training for godliness is much better, promising benefits in this life and in the life to come."8 We can all criticize poor Martha for becoming flustered in the kitchen while her sister sat listening in the living room. But how are we any different? We are both Martha and Mary. There will always be demands vying for our time. There will always be brush fires to douse. Yet inside us there will always be a yearning for time to sit at His feet. Jesus says that when you boil all of life down to the basics—when you think in terms of time and eternity—not much is truly important. In fact, He says only one thing is essential. Will we choose to spend quiet, reflective time alone with the Lord? Or will we allow life's pressures to work us into a frazzle? Will we build a sacred enclosure around our roots, or will we allow frenzied foot traffic to erode our spiritual roots and send us crashing to the earth? Mary made her choice, and so must we. Solomon wrote: "Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life."9 He too exhorted us to build a sacred enclosure around the headwaters of our life. To take care to protect that inner spring that nourishes and propels virtually everything else we will ever do. Just how do you do this? I promise you: If you will develop a daily self-feeding program from the Bible and allow yourself to be daily, hourly mentored by God's Holy Spirit, your life will undergo an unprecedented change for the better. Protecting and cultivating your spiritual root system is not a pill to swallow that automatically will bring you health, wealth, and a perfect family. But it will give you wide-open access to an all-wise, all-powerful God who will personally walk with you step by step. You'll embark on an adventure that will introduce you to lifelong mentors who may save your health, your marriage, your ministry, and your future. If you make Mary's choice, then you will find Mary's reward. CHAPTER 2 You Don't Have What It Takes Your testimonies also are my delight; They are my counselors.1 I didn't have what it took, and I knew it. But what was I to do? Stepping into my first senior pastorate at the age of thirty-one, I found myself shepherding a little church in a small town way down on the southernmost Hawaiian island. I worked and studied as hard as I knew how, and I did my best, but after six months of preaching I felt convinced I'd drained every last message between the Bible's front and back covers. I simply didn't know what else to say. Despite my frustration, I continued to study week after week . . . and kept running into one dead end after another. I knew that if I didn't get help soon, I would self-destruct. I tried calling other pastors for help—and maybe a little mentoring—but their own busy schedules refused to accommodate me. One late afternoon, when the cooling breezes began to blow, I left my office and took a walk through the neighborhood. Approaching a historic building, it dawned on me that this was the old missionary church of one of my ministry heroes. In 1837, God used a man named Titus Coan to bring a great revival to Hawaii. Coan loved these brown-skinned people so much that within three months of his landing he preached his first sermon—in Hawaiian! The islanders were so impressed with his desire to reach them that they came in droves. The sleepy town of ten thousand swelled to more than twenty-five thousand in the ensuing years as natives moved from far-flung districts of the Big Island to hear Titus Coan preach in their own tongue. As the missionary neared the end of his life, he wrote an autobiography that contained unedited accounts of his activities and accomplishments. Pastor Titus detailed his mistakes as well as his successes—things he shouldn't have done but did and things he should have done but didn't. He wrote about how God encouraged him—even in the down times—and spoke words of correction when he got off on a wrong track. His book Life in Hawaii carries a copyright date of 1882, and by the time I reached Hilo it had been out of print for many years. In hopes of finding an old copy, I paid a call on the Lyman Museum. To my delight, I found what I'd been hungering for. "Do you have a copy of Life in Hawaii by Titus Coan?" I asked the curator. She looked almost as old as the book itself. "Yes," she said with a touch of ice in her voice. "And what do you intend to use it for?" "I just want to read it," I said. "I'm a pastor here, and I've heard it's a really good book." She looked me up and down, hesitated, then with a sigh told me that the library's lone copy was very old and fragile. Only those with special dispensation could enter "The Archives," the hallowed vault where she kept the book. No one was allowed to borrow or photocopy Life in Hawaii. Since I desperately wanted to get my hands on it, I agreed to sit through a long, drawn-out orientation on the ins and outs of handling this literary treasure. This ancient guardian of The Archives made me feel as if I were being inducted into a secret society. MENTORED IN THE ARCHIVES After pledging my driver's license, my firstborn, and all my worldly goods, I followed her into the venerated vault. So this was The Archives. I looked around the musty, dimly lit room and observed shelf upon shelf of rare tomes, each individually wrapped in paper to safeguard





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