

SMALL THINGS,
BIG
THINGS

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BIG
THINGS

INSPIRING STORIES OF EVERYDAY GRACE

MICHAEL A. MILTON


P U B L I S H I N G
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To the congregations I have served in Overland Park,
Savannah, and Chattanooga:
those sheep of the Good Shepherd,
who have sought his presence along craggy cliffs
and in pleasant pastures,
through all the seasons of our lives together.

To my little congregation at home,
Mae and John Michael,
gathered for our “Cotter’s Saturday” nights,
where mother and father and son sought the Light
in the darkness,
not only for ourselves
but for the ones we felt called to serve.

To my Aunt Eva who worships Christ face to face.

And always, to my wife Mae.

“In your light do we see light.”
—Psalm 36:9

“They said to each other, ‘Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?’ ”
—Luke 24:32

A prayer for this book and for those who read it:

“May I always see Thy beauty with the clear eye
of faith,
and feel the power of Thy Spirit in my
heart,
for unless he move mightily in me
no inward fire will be kindled.”

—A Puritan Prayer
(*The Valley of Vision*, p. 187)

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Why do such acknowledgments invariably end with formal thanks to a spouse (for those of us who are married)? Is that just the proper form for such pages as this? It can be, I guess. But I think that beyond the technical and vocational gifts that create ministry and multiplication of ministry, all of which are vital and genuinely help form the writer and the writing, there

Acknowledgments

is a person who shares in the deepest parts of life. That person is my wife, Mae. God's grace becomes clear to me by just being around her. Her spirituality is deeper than my own. Her gifts are not the gifts of teaching or administration or writing. Her gift is love. She has made our home a place of familial warmth and safe retreat. She is the consummate shepherd's wife. She welcomes me in from the rain and the snow as well as the blistering sun. She soothes my head, wipes my feet, and gives me food and drink. She nourishes my soul with words of encouragement and sometimes with the silent, comforting presence that speaks louder than words. She knows when to inquire about the state of the flock and when to say, "Why don't we just watch Andy Griffith and eat a piece of cake, honey." She brings joy and peace. She is God's gift to me. I thank her in a way that I thank no other person and in a way that would redefine, lengthen, and deepen the word *gratitude*.

INTRODUCTION

The book you hold in your hands is a collection of little epistles written by a pastor to his people, but they are not sermons. They are musings, reflections, and sometimes critiques, but I wouldn't call them essays. They are each connected with spiritual things, most often scriptural subjects, but they are not devotionals. They are, I think, something else.

Once upon a time there was a wise mother who asked her two children as she tucked them into bed at night, "Where did you find God today?" The children, after a while of this, understood what their mother meant by these words that others, even adults, might find cryptic. One night her six-year-old boy said, "Momma, I found God when I fell down in the backyard and looked up and saw a cloud that looked like Uncle Purvis's nose." The mother smiled, nodded gently and approvingly, and said, "Very good." To her nine-year-old girl she asked, "And how about you?" And the daughter, wiser and more comfortable with her mother's game, said, "Momma, I saw God just now when you smiled out of the corner of your mouth, the

way you do when you are satisfied with us.” “Good,” the mother replied. “Then you know he is with us.” She would read a scripture, pray, tuck the children into bed, and turn out the light.

In a real way that is what these little pieces are. They are attempts by a father, a pastor, to help his congregation (often much wiser and more spiritually intuitive than their pastor, but maybe not with the time to sit and write about these things) to discover God’s presence in the midst of their everyday lives. These theological reflections are my questions, embedded in stories and reflections and devotional thoughts, that are merely seeking to inquire, “Children, where did you find God today?” Then before they could answer, and in order that I might stir them to answer in their own way, I would seek to say, like that excited child, “I found him here! Let me tell you about it!”

I did this so that they would know that God is with us. I want them to know this in their minds and in their hearts, because as we travel through life together (and that is what pastor and people really do), we travel Wizard-of-Oz-like through the place of lions and tigers and bears. Or to use a more faithfully biblical metaphor, we travel like sheep down steep, narrow passageways that creep, dangerously high, alongside mountain ridges. When we are not high, we are low, traversing wilderness valleys where bitter waters flow and sinister wolves perch above us in the cliffs waiting for one of us, a pathetic weak one or a foolish strong one, to make a mistake and leave the flock.

The shepherd is there to calm the flock as well as to feed and protect them as they go along these pathways. Indeed, often they will not eat until they are calmed.

I have sought to do what the wise mother did with her questions. I really wanted my flock—Jesus' flock entrusted to me—to know that God is with us. Then we could move on and read his Word and pray and find our protection and our best nourishment as we looked up to see the true Shepherd in our midst.

I hope, in these pages, you too will begin to appreciate the goodness and grace of the God who comes to us in clouds that look like Uncle Purvis's nose, or in mincemeat pie that smells like home. Maybe you will say, "I am ready to find him too." If you do that, you will want to go further and say, "If I have found his glory in clouds and in aromas, what if I were to actually look into the clear Word he has left us? What if I were to sit at the feet of Jesus on a pleasant hillside in the gospel of John, or gather next to others in a crowded living room in Rome in the first century to hear an account of his life from St. Mark? What if I were to find him on a Roman cross being crucified by those whom he created, or teaching those who did not recognize him on the road to Emmaus?"

We are assured in the Bible that if we seek him, we will find him. These little chapters from a pastor's heart are here to nudge you to do just that. They are here to lead you to ask your own questions, make your own discoveries (which you will), and travel from discovering his grace in your own everyday life to discovering his grace in the unique life of Jesus of Nazareth. Then when you say "Aha! I saw him!" he will say to you, "My child, you discovered me because I led you there myself. You have seen because I have revealed myself to you." And that, my dear reader, is the greatest discovery of all.

WILL SNOOPER BE IN HEAVEN?

*St. Francis, Eschatology,
and a Theology of Creation*

*The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the
leopard shall lie down with the young goat,
and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf
together; and a little child shall lead them.*

—Isaiah 11:6

As you read through the newspaper in the spring or the fall, you might come upon photographs of the blessing of pets. If you are not familiar with it, this is a service usually performed in Anglican and Roman Catholic parishes. The service comes either

in the spring during Rogation days (the days following Easter and before Ascension Thursday) or in the fall (the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi). The members are encouraged to bring their kitties and puppies (in places like rural Wales they even bring their lambs) for a blessing by the priest or vicar. Some of us shun this for several reasons. One, is there really spiritual blessing or benefit conveyed by any act outside of faith? Two, do dogs and cats (and sheep and canaries) really need it?

The practice came about due to certain emphases in the church calendar and has developed over many years. It has roots in rural Britain where vicars made their way through lambing season or harvest time to ask God's blessing on animals and crops. In the Roman tradition, it is associated more with St. Francis, who is said to have spent much time in the woods "preaching" to the birds and, in general, giving thanks for creation.

The rite of the blessing of pets is growing in American Episcopal and Roman Catholic circles. However, most won't tell you, "I am bringing Rover to church because of Rogation Day" or "Because I, too, want to be associated with St. Francis's emphasis on thanking God for all of his creation, I bring my Tweety Bird." I suspect that most bring their pets to be blessed for other more sentimental reasons. I not only understand those reasons, I admit to the same sentiment.

Where am I going with this? The photos in the paper of the blessing of the pets coincided with a lengthy conversation I had in the car with my son while my wife was shopping (great theological discussions often happen while my wife is shopping). This conversation

had to do with Snooper, and with Shadow, and with Tabby, and with eschatology, and with the hope in the heart of a little boy.

My son asked me a question that I bet most of you either asked as a child or have been asked by a child: will there be animals in heaven? My son wanted to know whether Shadow and Tabby would be in heaven. I think the conversation started because we talked about how our Welsh Corgi was getting older. This triggered not only a sadness in our midst at the thought of losing the little creature that had brought so much joy, but an opportunity to teach the Bible to my son.

“Well,” I replied, looking for the words that would blend the truth of Scripture with the pastoral need in my son’s life, “let me tell you about Snooper.” Then I told the following story.

“Snooper was my childhood dog. A mongrel that looked like his ancestry could have included Welsh Corgis, Border Collies, German Shepherds, and Blue Tick hounds, Snooper was given to me on a cold winter morning when I was five years old. He came in a little cardboard box. Aunt Eva had told Osborn Turner, the famed school bus driver and hog farmer of Watson, Louisiana, that I sure could use a dog. I was an only child and coming out of some tough times as a little fellow, so Aunt Eva figured a puppy would help. This was long before psychology studies showed that pets help hurting kids and old folks. And Osborn found this pup.

“Aunt Eva would never allow a dog or cat or any other animal in the house, but she relented on this occasion because of the severe winter that year and the helplessness of that pup—or maybe because he was

just downright cute! That little black and white pup began to grow, and he got into everything in sight. He spent most of his time snooping in the lower kitchen cabinets, and that was the reason Aunt Eva named him Snooper.

“Snooper and I grew up together. We ran through fields, chased lambs, got chased by bulls, got lost in cypress swamps, and he even went to school with me a few times. But eventually that little pup, who came to be my best friend, became very, very sick. I will never forget Dr. Smith, our veterinarian, coming out and pronouncing words that shook my world: “Son, Snooper is about to go to dog heaven.” That last night of Snooper’s life I slept with the old dog out in a shed in the back of the yard. I was about fifteen. When it was all over, I cried like anyone would. Like you probably will, son, when old Shadow finally goes. But I have a hope.”

“You will see Snooper again?” my son asked.

“Well, I don’t know how it all works, son, but God’s Word says that creation—and that includes Snooper and Shadow and Tabby and all of the animals everywhere—is waiting for Jesus to come again. All of creation is waiting for a new heaven and a new earth.”

I began to quote from Romans.

The created world itself can hardly wait for what’s coming next. Everything in creation is being more or less held back. God reins it in until both creation and all the creatures are ready and can be released at the same moment into the glorious times ahead. Meanwhile, the joyful anticipation deepens. (Romans 8:19–21, MSG)

“So this is not all there is, for us or for creation,” I told him. “And I know that the Bible tells us what that new day will be like for the world of animals.

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb,
and the leopard shall lie down with the young
goat,
and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf
together;
and a little child shall lead them. (Isaiah
11:6)

“God is on the move. Eden was lost through sin. But Jesus has redeemed us, and what he has done in our lives is now spreading through all the universe. One day everything will be brought fully under the lordship of Jesus, including creation. There is going to be a new heaven and a new earth, and it seems quite clear that since God originally made animals to provide companionship, even amusement, then they too will be redeemed.”

“So I will see Shadow again?” he asked, wanting my Bible lesson to answer his deepest longing.

“Son, I know how you feel. I want to see Snooper again. All I know is that God made the animals, our pets, and God is going to renew all things. This is not the end. There is mystery, but there is great hope in the mystery of God’s goodness.”

About that time my wife came back to the car, and we drove home and talked some more. As we walked through the door, grocery bags in arm, we were greeted by wagging tails and contented purrs.

We are not planning to have any blessing of the pets per se, but we will stand with St. Francis of Assisi to

say, “Thank you, Lord, for your gift of creation. It is wonderful. It is so like you to create a Welsh Corgi.” We will, in a sense, go with the English vicars to the fields and say, “Lord, unless you bring the rain and the sun, there will be no crops. Unless you, O Lord, give protection to this ewe, there will be no lambs.” We will acknowledge God’s sovereign goodness in creation and our dependence upon him.

Little girls and boys and parents struggling for answers, come to the Lord and leave your hopes with him who made puppies and kittens and lambs and lions.

Yes, I sure would like to see old Snooper again.
Who knows?

You know who.