



THE UNLIKELY MAY ALSO SERVE

By James Reed

It was February 1984. I sat on the couch in my home very ill with cancer. At that moment, life began to fade away. It was my time to die now – I must go. It all seemed very peaceful. I couldn't see the drapes across the room now. Everything became an uncertain hazy. A coldness grew on me, and there seemed to be nothing I could do. I called to my wife, Dell, and she came in her ever present way to do what she could. In a few minutes life did begin to return to me. It was not my time.

Later I realized how easily I had learned to die, and yet for forty years of my life, I knew nothing about how to live. I tuned God out of my life. I felt so unlikely – unlikely for anything. Would God have anything to do with someone like me? Not a chance. There were all of those good, talented, educated, clean living Christians out there. In my mind, God had an easy time rejecting me, and in my mind He surely did. Later, at Thorncrown Chapel, I was to learn that it was me who did all the rejecting. God has only one requirement in order to do something beautiful with each and every life. We just have to be available! So, if you feel unlikely and among the unchosen, and so many do – please read this little book. If only one of you can find that you can serve in a very wonderful and beautiful way – what a great little book this will be. The unlikely may also serve!!

Becoming Unlikely

Growing up in the woods near Pine Bluff Arkansas made me remember and love the outdoors forever. You can leave them, but you don't ever forget them, and there is a part of you that is always trying to return.

My dad had a country store – the kind that you only see on calendars these days. It was a good business, and my dad was respected in the community.

He and my mother believed in discipline. I'm sure my dad never wore six-guns, but he was the fastest draw in Arkansas when it came to removing the black leather belt he wore around his waist. Its sting persuaded me and my three sisters to strive to be as perfect as we could be. That was the problem – I could never be good enough, and my parents told me so every day. Since I always fell short, I assumed I was no good, and I gradually became a zero. All of you who have ever felt worthless know the emptiness, the self-hate, and the deadly desire to go unnoticed by God and man. It never occurred to me that God knew that I would never be perfect. I never knew that my parents were trying to make me better and that their methods were the only way that they knew how to express love for me. Never in my life did they tell me they loved me, so because of their strictness, I assumed they hated me. A million torments down the road I was to discover that they loved me and God loved me too! Wow!

Church and More Church

We were a family that went to church Sunday morning and Sunday night, and then we went back on Wednesdays. It was the family law at our house. When I was twelve, the talkative Mrs. Greenlee came to our village as part of a revival meeting. She talked to me much and asked me many questions. I heard her tell my dad that my answers were as good as the grownups. It meant that I was ready. A few nights later I went down the aisle to accept Christ as my savior. It was real then, and it is real now.

The church continued to be my dragon. Along with my parents, it taught me to be perfect, and I fell so far short of that goal. My misery and guilt was total. I was not what everyone wanted me to be, and I couldn't forgive myself, and I didn't think God would either.

As I approached age 16 some events came into my life that changed everything – nothing would ever be the same.

The church seemed to be more and more involved with scandal and the potential for scandal. Was the church minister the father of the young lady member's child? Did the deacon make sexual overtures to the young girl my age? As I reached 16, I became factually aware of many things that were going on in the church, and my castle came crumbling down. It died

before my eyes. My heroes turned to nothing. And then I did something that no human being should ever do. I decided that if this was church, I could do better on my own. I decided to turn away and go my own way.

For twenty four years I was to go down many trails, always searching, but never knowing that I was searching for the God that I left behind. I had decided to make the most common of all mistakes – to let others turn me away from God and the church. The leaf was leaving the tree to turn brown and wither upon the ground.

Winding Trails

Soon, World War II came into my life. I went into the navy. My life was bouncing around like the giant waves in the North Atlantic. Somewhere there was an answer, and I would find that answer.

I was sitting in a garden patio in Italy. It was really a bar, and it was time for my first drink. The church taught me that strong drink was evil; however, I decided that my teachers were evil, too. I ordered a bottle of Champagne. It didn't taste bad. I continued to drink the champagne, and then to my surprise I began to feel better. I felt like somebody! I didn't hurt anymore. I wasn't bad – I was alright! With every drink I was getting better. Where had this miraculous friend been all my life? Surely, this was the answer, and how easily I had found it. For the next 23 years it was to be one of the phony gods that consumed me. Little did I suspect, this fake friend would promise freedom and deliver bondage.

The Good Times

I returned from the war and spent five years in college getting my B. A. and M. A. degrees. I was going to be a teacher. I walked into the teacher placement office at George Peabody Teachers College in Nashville, Tennessee, ready to go to work as a teacher. "What do you have," I asked.

"Merced, California needs teachers," they said. Within days I was on my way to Merced, California. Now, to my great relief, I found even more ways to fill that inner emptiness that traveled with me. I discovered the party life. The faculty at my school was staffed by young people just like me. The search for the answers was on, and parties were the answer. Nightly parties and daily work-- what a way to go! You don't have to stop and think. It was on to the next fun. We even had an English teacher who could strum the guitar and sing the song "Blood on the Saddle." This must be it. I had found drinking, and now I had found the lifestyle to go with it. This must be perfect. The next school year I moved to Southern California where I could

better pursue my new way of life. In Southern California there seemed to be a volume of places to go and things to do.

Youth can be so great, and yet it can be such a liar. It allows excuses without complaint, but it's built on immaturity which can lead to poor judgments. I allowed Southern California and its lifestyle to go spinning on like a top that rocks back and forth, thinking I had found happiness. Yet always, at best, it only thinly disguised that terrible void inside that fed on my soul.

In applying for a new apartment, I ran into competition from a young lady seeking to rent the same place. I got the apartment, and yet this persistent young lady married me and also got the apartment. Patience and determination are still a part of my wife, Dell.

Another Trail

With marriage there soon came three wonderful children: Brian, Doug, and Lisa. This led me down yet another road. I decided my out of control lifestyle had to change and that I should set some goal for myself. The highest thing I could think of at that time was to be President of the 3,500 member Long Beach Teacher's Association. Surely that would make my life whole. I started to work my plan. I became a joiner and a worker. I didn't have time for my wife and family. I came home to sleep and change clothes. My credits grew: Council of Education, State Council of Education, any many others. Finally, I was elected president of the 3500 Long Beach teachers, involving 75 schools and a junior college. Surely I was alright now. My life had been made complete. When I visited the area civic clerks, I was always introduced, and all applauded. This surely proved that I was somebody, and all was well. And all appeared well, but it was still dark within my soul.

I forged ahead for a while with my newfound success. How quickly the joy faded. I was fast coming to know that my drinking trail, my party trail, and my education work trail had kept me on a Ferris wheel that went nowhere. Oh, how I desperately tried to cling to my false gods. They all had promised so much. Where did the fun go? How did the agony creep in? Self-destruction seemed to be my destiny.

The End of the Road

I awakened one morning and agony had walked into my life. All the false gods I had pursued for 24 years had fallen at my feet. I knew that I could not go one more day in the direction I had been going. It was the end of the parade.

I decided to go to church. It was a large church. I had been a member there for many years. I walked in and asked to see the pastor. An assistant went in to see the minister. He came back out and announced, “He can’t see you.”

“He can’t see me? Why?” I begged.

“He didn’t say,” he replied coolly.

I’m sure that minister had a dozen other things to do that morning, yet in my confused mind I took it as a total rejection by the church. I walked into the lobby of that giant building. I stood alone and the tears poured. The tears of the many years of frustration in my search for God all came at once. There was nowhere else to go now – nothing else to do. The church didn’t want me either. I would commit suicide on the way home. I would get my car going very fast and run it into a bridge abutment. It would only hurt me, and the misery would be over. My family would be better off without me. I had the only answer.

I moved to my car and headed for the freeway. You can go very fast there. Somewhere along the way I lost my courage and couldn’t go through with the plan. In my cloudy mind perhaps the hand of God nudged me. Arriving home, I paced the floor – back and forth, back and forth, and then I ran out the door and down the street. I wandered aimlessly – been everywhere – going nowhere. After a long time, I noticed a church on my left, and I walked up and banged on the door. An old minister came to the door and invited me in. He was ready and willing to talk to me. I never really liked this man, because he was the sort who thought that if you said “doggone” you would surely go to hades forever. I’m sure he looked on me with disfavor as well, and yet I will love this minister dearly as long as I may live, because he gave me a priceless gift – he had time for me.

He always had time for me. He introduced me to a group at his church that helped me to quit making drinking and living in the fast lane the center of my life. He counseled me, and he was my ever-available friend.

My return to God was slow but ever persistent. I badly wanted a close relationship with God. How little I knew about how to attain it. Babe of Babes, a child among children, I somehow had to find my way. There was never to be a turning back again. Feeble and unsure, I moved forward, never knowing for sure what was ahead. I had faith that more would be revealed to me if I would but hold on. God was gradually able to get through to me that each and every life was beautiful and special. Some of us manage to get so much in the way ...

Progress – at Last

My parents had never told me they loved me. Along the way, I decided that surely I would not let my family go through life and not tell them that I loved them. One evening I called them all into the family room and asked them to be seated. They couldn't hide their concern as to what might be happening. Silence came over the room and all words froze inside me. I could not speak. Finally, stumbling and mumbling, I stuttered these words. "I just want you to know that I love you more than anything in the world." I could say nothing more.

If you have never tried this, you ought to try it! They all went out and bought me gifts! It truly did make a lasting change in my family and what a great step forward for me in my feeble attempt to return to God.

My struggle to right myself with the Lord was complicated only by me. Most of us have our own private rebellions in varying degrees. My progress was slow, carried on by a tiny faith that burned dimly but always burning, sometimes flickering, but always there. I didn't pray much; however, at the beginning of each day, I would tell God that I was available for his use. Whatever he wanted to do with my mixed up life, it was available to him. I repeated the essence of that prayer a thousand times. It often seemed that God had no work for me, that he didn't want to use my life. He would use me a little here and there.

As God does not send more than we bear, I also believe he does give us work before we are ready for the responsibility. Although, we are often the last to know that we are indeed ready.

Along the way, I was asked to serve as finance chairman for the West Orange County Step House. This house was truly the last stop for the disenchanting. It housed men that no one wanted to touch, even their wives, families, and the world as a whole. They were the lost, the creatures, the rejected, despised by most. God had given me an assignment that would do more for me than I could ever do for the men. Never is a work closer to God than that work which allows us to reach out to the ones that have fallen. Many of us had to fall before we could fly. There is no greater joy than to see a fallen angel fly again! How good it is.

Fundraising was always a something I disliked. Now, I was asked to do just that – it really hurt. I became an expert on rummage sales, dinner dances, and all kinds of activities. The house was always at the brink of closing, but it never did.

It seemed to hang on the thread of our dinner dance, the biggest fundraiser of the year. I found that in fundraising you need big committees. We had a committee of twenty people to sell tickets. Everything depended on the sale of those tickets. Our first progress meeting arrived, and we all gathered to give our reports on sales. "They won't sell," echoed throughout

the room. "They are too expensive," they cried. All were prophets of doom. The house for the downtrodden was lost.

Old Bob arrived late that evening, creeping in almost unnoticed. "How did your ticket sales go, Bob?" I asked.

"Sold them all and my boss gave me a hundred dollars at work," he smiled. A new air came into the room. We had forgotten to tell Bob they wouldn't sell. He had sold his tickets! Maybe they would sell. Was it possible? And how they did sell. We sold out and had the greatest, grandest dinner dance ever. Thousands of dollars came in for the house. It would carry on and on, and the lost sheep had a home. Isn't it magnificent how God always puts the right person in the right place at the right time? Magnificent! God did use me at certain times and in certain places. I continued to teach school, which is surely a noble work within itself. I keep up my daily prayer.

"Use me, God as you see fit. I am available."

I'm grateful that only a little of the future was revealed to me at a time. I would have thought it insane and outrageous if I had known what lay ahead. The good shepherd understands his sheep. He was gradually to lead me in the way that I should go.

My wife, Dell, and I first visited Eureka Springs when we were newlyweds. We were charmed by the natural beauty of this timeless little village nestled in the Ozark mountains. In 1972, we returned and bought 25 acres of land out in the country just outside of Eureka Springs. We had no special idea or use for the land, and yet it was a pretty little mountainside, and the cost was only a pittance compared to other parts of the country.

Soon, the thought came to me that maybe we should build a retirement home on the mountainside. There was little excitement about the idea. My wife and three children, Brian, Doug, and Lisa, were all native Californians and had little interest in Arkansas. I was finding more happiness in California and really felt no strong need to build a home in Arkansas.

We gradually started to look at magazine house plans. It was good recreation. We slowly drifted toward building a house on the mountainside. During construction, I kept asking myself "Why are you doing this?" We just didn't have any strong motivation. My family was only interested in California, and I found no excitement in the idea.

We completed the house and were immediately faced with the anxiety of leaving a vacant house unattended most of the year. First, I thought we could get a small mobile home and park it nearby. Perhaps a retired person would like to live there. Then it seemed better to build a small cottage. Finally, the best solution came to me. I decided to make the bottom story

of my house into another apartment. Now, I had a duplex. We thought privacy would be a great blessing on the secluded hillside. Now, I had surrounded myself with living units for people. My foolishness seemed unbelievable. Little could I know that we would soon desperately need staff housing for a glass chapel in the woods.

After each school year, we would return to Arkansas for the summer. Each day I would go down to the mailbox to get the mail. Most every day there was several cars parked around the mailbox, obviously relaxing and enjoying the Ozark charm. One day I had a nice chat with the people and started back up the hill. The thought came to me, "Why don't you build a chapel back in the woods on the mountain and give these people something uplifting to do and help them find peace." Little did I know that at that moment, God had just taken me up on my offer of many, many years. The hand of God, moving ever so quietly, had just pointed at me and said, "Now is the time – this you should do."

I tried to put the thought out of mind; however, it returned the next hour and the next week and the next month. It seemed it returned as regular as the sunrise. I started to seriously argue with God. "No, God, you have the wrong one. I haven't lived right, I haven't taken the right paths, I know nothing about chapels. You surely have the wrong one. You can reach down at random and pick anyone off the street, and they would be better than me. You have the wrong one!" Little did I know that God has no list of requirements for service. We just have to be available. For years I told God I was available, but I still continued to argue with God and started to build barriers. "I don't have enough money; I will never find a good architect in these hills; I will be separated from my family in California during construction." The list rolled on and on.

One by one, the barriers seemed to fall away. I was able to sell some of the property we owned in California and raised what I then thought was enough money to build the chapel.

Sitting in a local restaurant one morning, I was sounding off about the futility of ever finding a capable architect in these woods, especially one who could carry out this dream as I envisioned it. Buddy Griffin, restaurant owner, overheard my words and evidently he must have directed a gentleman to my table. The stranger said he knew just the architect I needed. He said he would fly his private plane to Fayetteville and meet me there at an appointed time. He would then take me to meet this architect. It seemed somewhat of a useless chase; however, I thought that if this gentleman would go to that much trouble, I could at least drive to the Fayetteville airport.

I met him on the correct day, and we drove to the office of E. Fay Jones. Mr. Jones was a slim, balding, middle age man. I was impressed by his intensity as he became increasingly unable to hide his excitement about the concept that I presented to him. In my ignorance, I

thought the project was not lucrative for an architect and would surely be rejected. Little did I know I had just presented him with the creative assignment of a lifetime, the kind an architect can only hope for. I was later to see tears on architects' faces as they stood in Thorncrown Chapel, wondering if they might ever have the opportunity to see if they had a "Thorncrown Chapel" in their creative souls. Most will never know.

Before leaving I asked Mr. Jones pointedly – "Do you want to do it?"

"It might be fun," he replied.

"It would be something different for me." It was to be his first church.

I left knowing that another barrier had been knocked down. The chapel had an architect. Incidentally, the stranger turned out to be Mr. Freeman Latsos of Fort Smith, Arkansas. Again, God had put the right man, in the right place, at the right time. Again, in my ignorance, I didn't even know God was with me. Just all the time – all the time! He was always with me, but He walked so softly I never knew he was there.

About this time, some relatives from Pine Bluff came to visit. I timidly told W. J. Reed and Mrs. Nance Brown about the idea of building a chapel in the woods. "Go ahead," they said. "We think it's a fine idea." I truly needed that endorsement, and it moved me forward.

I called Mr. Jones to discuss the design. I told him we wanted it all glass, and we wanted it to seat about 130 people. I also told him that we wanted a person sitting in the chapel to have the feeling that they were sitting out in the woods.

A few weeks later, he called California and invited me to come to Fayetteville to see the design. He unrolled the sketches, and the more I looked, the more I became mentally unrolled as well. I didn't like the design. I think most layman viewing Thorncrown Chapel on paper would have felt the same way. At that time, the lower members of the trusses that crossed inside the chapel protruded on through the walls and extended some length outside the building. I thought it looked like some strange landing gear. As we discussed it, I let Mr. Jones know that his drawings were not really what I had in mind. He kept presenting this building to me and saying how much he would like to see it built. I didn't see how that could ever be, as it just didn't look like the chapel of my dreams. Finally, in exasperation and showing great hurt, Mr. Jones said, "Alright we will throw the whole thing in the waste basket and start completely over. We will throw this all away." He couldn't hide his deep disappointment and hurt. The design still didn't move me, but his sincere desire and hope for this design did change my thinking. Finally, very reluctantly, I said, "Alright, if you feel that strongly about it, let's go with it." Little did I know a great design had just missed the wastebasket by minutes. The line

between success and failure is often as fine as a razor's edge. The design was to know its moment.

Soon the architectural crew came over to pick the site, and we chose a spot for the chapel, and it was carefully surveyed and marked with orange ties. In retrospect, I know it was the worst of all sites, close to my home, and it did little to display God's creation on the mountain.

As I was leaving my home a few days later, I heard the radio say that with the strong wind the chill factor, it felt like it was ten below zero. In the bitter cold, I went out to inspect our newly chosen building site. After walking around for some time trying to visualize a building there, I began to realize that the extreme wind and cold was making me numb. It was important that I return to my home. It was at this moment that I did something that defies explanation (1). I turned not toward my home but away from it and starting to beat my way through the thick underbrush across what is now our parking lot and deep into the woods. Exhausted, I stopped and looked around me. There was two limestone and rock arms reaching out from the mountainside. In-between was a space perfect for a chapel the size we had planned. The rock arms seemed to announce that this was where the building should be. I stood there about one minute, and that was enough. My excitement grew. I fought my way back through the maze and raced to my home. I phoned the architects and said, "Come over quickly, can you come right now?" Doubting my sanity, they agreed to come over. I lead them to the new site. They looked around and quietly said, "You could have gotten us up in the middle of the night for this."

After they left, I sat meditating on what had happened. I was disturbed, because much had happened that I didn't understand. It was not my desire or plan to go into those woods. I was like a man possessed. "Possessed with what?" I asked myself. "I must keep quiet about this," I decided. "People will think I am strange." I made up my mind that upon my return to California I would go to the Bible bookstore and buy some books about the Holy Spirit. I was to learn much. To this day I'm often asked, "Who picked this site?" Even if I try to say, "I did," the words catch in my throat. I know it was not me. Man, in his arrogance, often thinks he does much, and yet we do so little, if we are truly listening to the Spirit of God. The quiet hand of God had again moved to pick a site for Thorncrown chapel. Without really knowing it, we had gotten out of God's way so he could put it all together.

As I boarded the California bound plane at the Dallas airport, I felt content. We had an architect, a design, and a site. We even had someone to supervise construction, an excellent contractor named Jerry La Bounty. I now had to have the courage to say "Let's go."

As the plane roared down the runway, I felt what seemed to be a human head come from my back, up under my arm and then out on my chest. I looked down into the face of a young lady. She was frozen and panicked with her fear of flying. "If I was as scared as you are, I would pray," I said.

"I don't know how," she then fled. After I had gotten her disentangled from me, and we were flying some five miles above the earth, I started to talk to her. She was meeting her service man husband in Los Angeles. "Yes, I want to believe," she said, "however, I don't know much about it." We talked and we slowly went through those simple steps. The plane touched the runway in southern California. She arose to go.

"Do you believe now?" I asked.

"Yes, I do, I do."

"Are you a Christian?" I questioned.

"I am now," she replied and she left smiling her way into the cavern that is Los Angeles International Airport. The unbuilt chapel was already being used.

My wife reacted to the design much as I had, and yet a few days later, I called and said, "Let's go, let's start construction." The general response was "Are you sure?" So many dreams die as babies. Was this one really going to grow into maturity? Maybe no one was sure, but we all started to act as if we were sure. Thus, in March 1979, we broke ground for the little chapel. The building supervisor had mentioned building the chapel in 6 months. Little did I know that counting planning time, it would be two years in the making, two of the hardest, most frustrating, painful years of my life. Satan had noted that an amateur, a baby, who really didn't know the power of God, had plans to build a chapel in the woods in Arkansas. He smacked his lips, clapped his hands and danced. Oh what fun it was going to be! He had all of that and more too, but he didn't win.

In the beginning, I was almost immediately faced with what I then called the Ozark factor (2). The Ozark factor is nothing, and it is a thousand things. It doesn't affect everyone, and there are some great workers and great people in the Ozarks. An example of the factor is when a man says, "I'll be here to work in the middle of the week." The problem is that you never know which week. It is the man who works until he has bread and meat on the table, and then he is content not to work again until he needs bread and meat on the table, again. It is the man who, when questioned about being consistently late for work, calmly replies, "I like to be late for work. I don't like to be on any schedule. I can arrive late and still do as much work as the other people." It is admirable, in a way, that many Ozark people move only at one speed – SLOW. They refuse to join the speeded up world and to be a part of it. Any attempt to go faster,

speed up, or to request more is a declaration of war to this kind. You become sort of numb to being factored by one of these thousands of ways and things that hinder progress. You just quietly say to yourself, "I was factored this morning." It makes you doubly grateful for those heroes who are still hard, resourceful workers. They are the people who turn wood, stone, and glass into beautiful chapels.

Arriving in California, I began to see and know that my new pattern of life wasn't working too well. I was spending two weeks in Arkansas and two weeks with my family in California. I would just get adjusted to life in one place and then it was time to pack.

Our family seemed to disintegrate to a degree. Rules the family had lived by concerning homework, phone calls, and other things became obnoxious as soon as Dad left town. I would come home and battle to put things back together again. It seemed I could find little peace in either state. Once when I came home to turmoil, I turned away from our home and went to see a minister for counseling. It went alright until I told him I was involved in building a glass chapel in the woods in Arkansas. He reacted as if I needed a lot more help than he could give. His attitude was one that I would encounter often but never understood. Perhaps I do now.

Work at the chapel construction site seemed to move slowly and with many problems. One of our workers was a fine young man with a wife who teamed with him to make a handsome, likeable pair. He was an able worker, and we all liked and admired him very much. Along the way, we hired a carpenter from out of state. He seemed to be a fun loving, clever, young fellow, and we hoped he would turn out well. The young couple befriended the stranger, and since he seemed lonely and away from home, they invited him into their home on weekends.

A few weeks later I noted that the work habits of the young married man had suddenly changed. He seemed to move as if in a trance. His detachment from the job was complete. Soon I heard of the tragedy. The out of state stranger had run off with the young man's wife. It hurt us all and the morale on the job was never to be the same again. The crew seemed to disintegrate and drift away. The charming stranger remained in the area, and there were rumors that there might be gun play. This moved my blood pressure up as I could see the headlines, "Murder at Chapel Site!" It had all the components of a sensational media story. It had all the parts to doom a little chapel before it held its first service. After weeks of fear and anxiety, I realized a total tragedy had been avoided. Again, God had been with us in our desperate time of need.

I sat making out checks to pay for expenses and materials. They were large checks in my world, \$3,000; \$5,000, \$6,000. A cold fear came over me. This money was not coming back. This money was gone! I trembled with a concern for my future. Like many of you, I had always been

taught that you get full value for your money. If possible you get a “good buy” or you get your money back plus a profit. This money would not return. I couldn’t sleep at night, and my nervousness increased with the days. The tornado inside me would not go away. I returned to Eureka Springs and still sat brooding each night. And then a simple thought was given to me. “It all belongs to God anyway. Let it go, let it go.” I gradually accepted that simple truth and was able to gain peace. It was only the beginning of the journey, and I did not know the money would come back in a hundred ways. To mention only one, it gave me joy, a priceless treasure.

Perhaps the thing that hurt most during that time was the ridicule I faced. Essentially, the only credibility the project had was with God. There was rampant doubt, fear, and scorn on every corner. Oh, how I wished only one person would come out in the woods to the construction site and say, “Hey, this is a great idea.” or “This is going to be wonderful.” I would gladly have kissed that person’s feet. The approach most likely was the more typical, “Only a fool as big as you would be doing this.”

I began to doubt myself. Was I alright? Had my sanity quietly left me? Maybe I was just a fool. That seemed to be the best alternative at the time – just to be a fool. I think I settled for that.

Visiting Eureka Springs, I noticed two businessmen standing on the street, talking. I would have given both arms for their respect. Picking up pieces of the conversation it sounded much like this:

He’s building a chapel in the woods (laughter)!

Only in Eureka Springs (more laughter)!

By then, I was so low I had burrowed underground, like a line from the old song, “I couldn’t hear nobody pray.”

My wife, Dell, was still questioning the meaning of this project. She still had vivid memories of my life in the fast lane. She couldn’t visualize what turn this new dream might take. Christian friends in California didn’t help any, as they took a “You must do something about Jim,” attitude. They felt that anyone building a chapel in the woods in Arkansas was reason for concern. How good it would have been if I had only known my wife would be a hardworking, dedicated worker at the chapel. More importantly, her work was superbly dedicated to God and for his glory.

Still returning to California every two weeks, I would often attend a Christians Business Men’s breakfast. Being so heavily involved in the building program in Arkansas, I wanted to tell someone about what was going on. The men would look at me quizzically and slowly vacate,

moving to another table. After this happened a couple of times, I tried to keep quiet about the little chapel. It seemed I was alone.

A long series of events continued to harass me at the building site. I kept asking God, “Why do you have to make this so hard, so impossible?” I know now that it wasn’t God who made it difficult. In the midst of all of this, I decided that if all of life came down to knowing who you are and what God expects you to do. I knew I would always be trying to pin down “Who I am,” but I was doing what God expected me to do. God would reveal more later. I had faith that this would come to pass.

The End and the Beginning

Most things cost more than we expect in our times, and I soon realized that this would be the case with the chapel. We kept scrambling for more money, and we kept the project going for a long time. Then we ran headlong into the credit crunch of 1979-1980. It was something new to me. The prime rate was 21%, and loans were out of reach at that tremendously high interest rate.

I approached Fay Jones and the construction supervisor Jerry La Bounty at the chapel construction site. “We don’t have any more money and we can’t get any more money,” I said sadly. They turned to stare at me and give me a look as if to say “Surely, you can do something about that.” I tried to explain to them; however, they were not open to understanding that I was unable to find any solution to the problem. A few days later, I awakened one morning to one of those black, dark days that many of us have experienced. There was no grey area, no sunlight. I felt too low to pray.

I paced back and forth and then stopped to stare off into the valley across from my mountainside home. The valley in my soul seemed deeper and wider and bottomless. There was no way to cross. I knew in my heart it was all over. At first, it was too painful to even say to myself. Yet, I knew there was to be no chapel in the woods.

As the darkness of another night approached, I decided to take one last trip to visit the little chapel. I would never come back again. It would be too painful to ever come back again. I moved down the trail looking around at the trees, the room sized boulders, the cedars. It really would have been a beautiful place for a chapel.

As I walked through the doors, I began to cry. It was the kind of crying you can do when no one will ever see or hear you, the kind of crying you think grown people are not supposed to do.

Through my tear clouded eyes, I looked around. It occurred to me that it must be 70% finished. I approached the altar. Moving to my right, I fell to my knees on the stone floor. I had never gotten on my knees to pray before. I placed my head sideways on the altar and started to talk to God.

“God, it’s all over now,” I said, “There can’t be a chapel in the woods. It seemed like a good idea, but there’s no use now. The money’s all gone, and the people think I’m a fool, and there is nothing left within me to let me carry on. I’m so sick inside. There is nothing, nothing at all to go on with. I’m sorry, I believe I tried as hard as I could, I’m so sorry,” I sobbed.

I talked to God like I had never in my life done before. It was not a textbook prayer. It was just telling God the way I really felt it was and the way it had been.

It was getting dark as I started out the doors for the last time. I didn’t look back. I just walked straight ahead looking at the ground. It was like leaving someone you had loved, but they hurt you very badly. The pain did not go away.

Somewhere along the trail I stopped. “Hey, that was me in there talking to God that way,” I whispered. It didn’t seem like me and it wasn’t the way I would act – but it was me. I usually was more in control than that. What was going on? I had to admit that the little uncompleted chapel had changed me and my life. I would never be the same again.

Walking toward my home, I realized that if the little uncompleted chapel had changed my life. I thought perhaps, if it was completed, it would change some other lives as well. I made up my mind to hold on for just a few more weeks. Maybe a miracle would come my way.

The prime rate held at 21%. You couldn’t sell property, and you couldn’t very well buy property, either. The business world was frozen, and those who were trying to operate at those interest rates often found themselves bankrupt. There seemed nowhere to turn.

I remembered a lady money lender in Illinois who had given me loans in the past. She was the shrewdest business person I had ever known. Everyone in business hopes to put together a business deal that is perfect with every detail covered and without loopholes of any kind. This fine lady could do it.

She was meticulous to the last penny and always charged top dollar. As I thought about writing her, I recalled the time a letter I sent to her had three cents postage due. In her next letter, she mentioned the shortcoming and made it clear that I was to do my duty. I did my duty.

As I sat down to write this lady, I smiled at what I was about to do. I was going to ask her to put a second mortgage on my house in California at a 12% interest rate. I knew, and she

knew that the rate was 21%, and she could add on 5% more, because it was a second mortgage, and that would make it 26% interest! “Yes, this is really funny.” I thought as I dropped the letter in the mail box.

A few days later a letter post marked Illinois came in the mail. It looked like a letter of rejection. I opened it without nervousness, believing I knew the answer already. I began to read and then: dream of dreams – miracle of miracles! She offered to make the loan just as I had asked. My heart banged a tattoo inside my chest. The little chapel would be completed. It would have its chance!!

I paced nervously, saying to my wife, Dell, “This can’t be true. She wouldn’t do this. It is not like her.” My wife looked at me and quietly said, “Jim, don’t you see the hand of God in that?” I turned to jelly, the hand of God, the awesome hand of God! He was always with me, but he walked so softly.

The chapel moved on toward completion. As it took shape and form, local businessman Jay Gustin stopped by to visit the site. We walked over to my house to sit and talk awhile. “Don’t you feel it? Don’t you feel it?” He asked.

“Feel what?” I said.

“The chapel,” he answered.

I noticed he had tears in his eyes. Finally, here was someone who said something encouraging. Did the chapel have a chance? Just maybe, it might have a chance to serve.

As time went on, it appeared the construction work could go on without end. I was sure it could drag on for another year. In desperation, I decided to set an opening date. It was to be June 15, 1980. As time rolled by, it became clear that we would not be ready June 15. Three months before that date, it looked hopeless. Time sped by and we were down to 15 days. On June first, the place was a disaster. Construction debris was piled high, and piles of dirt, stone, and litter were everywhere. The trail into the site was a mud pie. We still held fast – we would open June 15, 1980.

The next two weeks produced some people that seemed like angels. Our funds were exhausted, and our construction supervisor was away meeting a prior job commitment. It was up to us now. The cast that did so much with so little knowledge or skill was made up of my wife Dell and our children Brian, Doug, and Lisa. Doug had two young friends from California come in to help. They were strong young men. Phil Gironda had been a wrestler in high school and Greg Smith was tall, athletic, and ever energetic. We were to need all that strength and more, too. Our first two chapel ministers had arrived, and they became laborers at the chapel.

Rev. T. J. Sasser and Rev. W. C. Roebuck became the best workers their semi-retirement years allowed them to be.

Down to one week now, it appeared hopeless; however, no one would mention it, and the activity became more furious every day. The days became as long as the daylight and a person's strength allowed.

People were doing things they had never done and really did not know how to do. Near the end, my wife Dell, Phil, Doug, and Greg were staining the light fixtures. They discovered it took the four of them one hour to do one fixture. That means it took 96 man hours just to stain the light fixtures.

Debris was being hauled away in every kind of vehicle. Brain's hatchback car never recovered from the beating of being repeatedly piled high with rubble. With three days left, the situation was desperate, and each of us was desperately tired.

Arlie Weems, an artist who uses heavy equipment for his brush, came out to restore the site as much as possible. He leveled and smoothed and pampered the soil and rocks. The beauty of the area around the chapel began to reappear. It was June 14, 1980. A small group of people had prayed a lot and worked a lot. We all had that good feeling of knowing we had given it everything we had. There was no holding back. We were opening without front or rear doors and no pews. The large kiosks that sit on the altar and on both sides of the front doors were also missing and much, much more remained unfinished. We would open as scheduled. That next day we would open.

I slept little that night. The chapel was going to have its chance. Tomorrow was June 15, 1980. Surely, people would come from everywhere to worship in the midst of the woods. Could there be anything closer to God than to sit on a beautiful Ozark hillside in a little glass chapel right in the heart of God's creation? I was like a child on Christmas Eve. My cup was running over. Tomorrow we would open. Dreams do come true if we are available to God and don't ever quit. I felt good about that – with God's help, I didn't quit.

I awakened the next day full of excitement. It was June 15th. The biggest day of my life had arrived. My Christmas day in June was here. It would surely be a great day. We opened promptly at 8:00 AM and stayed open to 8:00 PM. By the end of the day, my Christmas day had turned to ruin. How could it be? What made it happen? Why? Why? The pain and shock was complete. Nobody came.

We continued to open at 8:00 AM and close at 8:00 PM. You could sit quietly in the chapel and not be disturbed. Our chapel hosts on duty eventually grew depressed with the lack of contact with people. Our expenses had accelerated, and our gifts to the ministry were almost

nil. After one 12 hour day, we collected the offering from the two offering boxes we had installed near the chapel entry. It was \$2.34. The daily utilities were ten times that amount.

As the days moved into weeks, I was back to a solitary fact: I was a fool. The world had been right. This dream had no merit. It was doomed before it began. I could only wonder where it all went wrong.

With sadness and hurt, we started to prepare for a dedication service. It seemed so futile to dedicate something to God that the people were not using for the glory of God. We moved ahead. The date of the dedication was August of 1980.

Dr. James Pleitz, Pastor of the beautiful Park Cities church in Dallas, came to dedicate the church. We chose a slogan that was to be our theme, our motivation, and our true desire. A song that matched our slogan moved through the woods on that dedication day. It was *To God be the Glory*.

We also had a name now. The chapel would be called Thorncrown Chapel. Fay and Mrs. Jones had made two lists of biblical words. When driving along, or at random, they would take a word from one list and match it with a word from the other list. Thus Thorn and Crown came together and seemed to make a lasting impression on them.

I brought the name to our group, and they didn't like it. I thought it sounded painful and yet, of course, there was pain. After going through many names, we kept coming back to Thorncrown. Finally, it was decided. We would call it Thorncrown.

It was the day of the dedication. We picked Dr. Pleitz up at the airport. He was an old friend from Ouachita University. I was too destroyed with the exhaustion of defeat to be a friend to any man that day.

We had tried to get some people for the dedication. We had called on relatives, construction workers, architects, and a few close friends that we could depend on. With all of that, the chapel was about half full. Our big ad in the local paper seemed to go unnoticed. The dedication service went well, and the chapel was dedicated to God. It was not important to count the numbers. The heavy question on my mind was – would it even be used for His glory?

We were organized as a nonprofit Corporation. This allowed gifts to the ministry to be tax deductible. The first trustees were Mr. W. J. Reed, Mrs. Nance Brown, Mr. Fay Jones, my wife and I, and Doug and Brian Reed. We choose not to pass any debt onto the chapel, and we donated eight acres of land for its use. It is our dream that it will always belong to every person that visits the chapel.

My early concern and dismay for the future of Thorncrown Chapel did not go unnoticed by certain people. Thus came about the first attempt to take over Thorncrown. Our inexperience and vulnerability had become obvious.

The first call came from a church in another state. The gentleman said he was a deacon in this church, and they had noticed our financial need and general lack of progress. He said his church was going to help us financially. He indicated it would be substantial. He said his pastor would get in touch with me in a few days. I hung up the phone, full of jubilation. This church was part of one of a well-known denomination. That gave it instant credibility with me.

The second call reiterated their plans to give a large cash gift to Thorncrown Chapel. I awaited the pastor's call.

Finally the pastor called. I told him we were grateful for their concern, and we appreciated the gift. He outlined the "gift." He was coming as minister and the other gentleman as a public relations specialist. A team had been organized. The chapel would be used as a backdrop for a huge TV ministry. All mention of a "gift" now evaporated, and the "take over" came to the front.

Pressure continued to mount, and in their final call the original caller stated that they would be flying into Fayetteville the next day. There was no more room for polite talk. I came down very hard on them, and that was the end of that experience. We had much to learn. We had begun.

A few days later two young men came down the trail. They wore t-shirts and tired blue jeans, and they would have gone unnoticed, except for the huge amounts of photographic equipment they carried. "May we photograph the chapel?" they asked.

"Sure, go ahead," I answered. What do we have to lose? I mused. Fay Jones and I had been the only two to take detailed pictures. They took pictures, and they took more pictures. Who could have suspected that these two young men, Architecture Photographers Hursley and Lark, would be used to help change the future of Thorncrown Chapel. They had a camera, and they were part of God's plan.

Victory at Last

The Eureka Springs Times Echo, our local weekly paper, came to visit and wrote a comprehensive story about the chapel. They even mentioned that the little chapel was destined to be recognized around the world. I was still hoping it would be recognized in our little city, Eureka Springs, population 2,000.

Newspapers seem to take note of what other newspapers are writing, and soon many more newspapers ventured into the woods. As newspaper articles appeared, even more journalists started to become interested. The word was going everywhere. “There was a unique little chapel in the woods in Eureka Springs. It was a very peaceful, serene place.”

Following the newspapers, came television. They came in numbers. Bob McCord did a half-hour program on Thorncrowne that the Arkansas Educational Network presented four times. Other T V stations covered it as a news event. People would be sitting in their motel rooms several hundred miles away and view Thorncrowne on TV. They would get in their car and drive non-stop to the little wayfarer chapel. Soon it was to receive more widespread TV coverage around the land.

Magazines took their turn. Hursley and Lark, the young architecture photographers, had, without our knowledge, sent out photo presentations to the architecture magazines as well as many major U. S. magazines. We also did not know that many of them were buying the pictures.

March 1981, Thorncrowne was the *Architectural Record's* cover story. *Architectural Record* is a premier magazine of architecture, and Fay Jones' life was never to be the same again.

Magazines would continue to write about the chapel. *Time*, *Newsweek*, *U. S. News and World Report*, *Guideposts*, *Christian Life*...and on the list goes.

I was sitting on a plane returning to California when I spotted a gentleman in the next seat reading *Time* magazine, and coincidentally, he was looking at the photo of Thorncrowne. I pointed to the picture and said “I just left Eureka Springs. My wife and I built that chapel.” He looked at me with concern and later moved his seat. I decided to be more discreet.

Yes, the word did go out and people started to arrive from everywhere. Before 1980 was over we had 25,000 people worship for at least a few minutes or more at the chapel (3). God had opened the doors. He was about to show us many things.

Editor's notes:

(1) The supernatural element of Thorncrowne's story was always difficult for my dad to talk about. Near the end of his life, he told what really happened that day. Dad was taking a look around the site when he felt a strange sensation. Though he was alone, he felt like someone was gently pushing him, as if to say, “Walk this way!” When Dad reached Thorncrowne's current site, the urging stopped.

(2) This story was written over 30 years ago. The Ozark Factor is hard to find in the Ozarks these days. Over the years, we have had the privilege of working with many talented individuals and businesses who have sacrificed to help preserve Thorncrown Chapel.

(3) No one envisioned how many visitors Thorncrown would receive over the years. On especially busy years, the chapel has received over 200,000 visitors.