

No  
Greater  
LOVE

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# No Greater LOVE

True Stories of  
the Ultimate  
Sacrifice

*Greater love hath no man than  
this, that a man lay down his  
life for his friends. —JOHN 15:13*

KARL HAFFNER



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# Dedication

To my dad, Pastor Cliff Haffner,  
who not only told many of these cherished stories but lived them.

Dad, your life has been a consistent and convincing  
sermon of sacrifice, grace, and love.

There is no man on earth that I respect more than you.



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# Preface: Dad's Communion File

I'LL NEVER FORGET THE STORY YOUR FATHER TOLD ONE COMMUNION SABBATH," Mr. Carpenter reflected. "Even though it's been twenty-five years since I was the head elder and he was the pastor here, I still remember it. I haven't heard the story since, but it was about a girl in North Dakota who was caught in a blizzard. As I recall, her name was Hazel Miner." Mr. Carpenter guided me through the touching details of a story that I, too, had heard my father tell.

Mr. Carpenter recounted the sobering sacrifice that Hazel Miner made to rescue her siblings. His voice cracked while his eyes leaked. Tears sopped his well-defined wrinkles as he connected the story to the sacrifice of Christ—just as my father had done decades before.

I zoomed in for a close-up shot. I wanted to spotlight the moment on video to show at my dad's surprise retirement party. In that profound and holy exchange, I sensed Mr. Carpenter whispering my father's legacy. This tribute of memorable stories was echoed by parishioners who spanned forty-three years of ministry and accented five hours of video interviews. The common thread that wove through the tapestry of memories was this predictable comment: "Every quarter for the Communion service, your dad would tell a story. I loved those stories."

I, too, remember those church services with special fondness. I hated to miss Communion Sabbath—not because I was some superspiritual kid; actually it was because we got out of church early and I liked that. Fifteen minutes was all Dad needed to take us to Calvary through a story of human sacrifice. No preaching, little moralizing—the story was all we'd get that week. But those stories remain long after most sermons are forgotten.

Today, those sermons (along with other stories that I have found) are stuffed into a fat file that I labeled "Dad's Communion Stories." As a pastor, I retrieve that file every quarter to hunt for a story to share at a Communion service. The tales trigger vibrant memories of sitting in a pew, hanging on my father's every word. Some stories take me back to the Providence Seventh-day Adventist Church, where my dad baptized me. Other stories remind me of the embarrassment I felt as a teenager in the Roanoke Seventh-day Adventist Church,

watching my dad sob through a story. Still other stories spark memories of impactful collisions with the Cross as I grappled to comprehend the scandalous nature of God's love and His atonement.

Dad's Communion stories shaped my soul unlike any seminary course in Greek or homiletics or eschatology. Even the stories that have now blurred with age are for me clearer snapshots of grace than any heady lecture I regurgitated on an essay exam. Such is the power of story.

"It would be well," Ellen G. White tells us, "to spend a thoughtful hour each day reviewing the life of Christ from the manger to Calvary. We should take it point by point and let the imagination vividly grasp each scene, especially the closing ones of His earthly life."<sup>1</sup> It has been my experience that no other spiritual practice has as equal an impact as lingering in the shadow of the Cross for an hour each day. This book offers a companion guide as you go to Calvary. My prayer is that you will see God's sacrifice in a fresh way, through new eyes.

Years ago, I attended the Passion play in Puyallup, Washington. Scores of folk had talked it up, and for years, I had intended to go. Then someone told me that local pastors got free admission. OK, that got me there.

At dusk, we settled into our seats just behind the sound board, which I swear covered an acre. Sound and light technicians danced about, busily tweaking hundreds of knobs and sliders.

*Wow!* I thought as the drama unfolded. *This production rivals Hollywood.* There were hundreds of actors. Camels, horses, sheep, and goats provided the feel of first-century Palestine. And then came the special effects: thunder, lightning, walking on water.

Sitting next to me was a woman who obviously didn't know the story. While I am quick to claim eavesdropping as my primary spiritual gift, in this setting, I found her interruptions to be annoying.

"Who is that man?" she asked the guy next to her.

"Oh, um, that's Peter."

"Who was Peter?"

"Well," he stammered, "Peter was one of Jesus' disciples."

"Disciples?"

"Yea, disciples, um, well, see, Jesus ran with this gang of twelve guys. But they weren't called the Crips or the Bloods—well, maybe they would have called themselves the Bloods." He was clearly amused by his double entendre that flew right over her head. "Anyway, His gang—they were called disciples."

"Oh, *coooooool*," she sighed, her curiosity quieted for a few ticks.

"Holy Moses! Did Jesus really make that blind man see, or was it mostly smoke and mirrors?"

"He really was a Miracle Worker," her friend explained.

Meanwhile, I sat there coveting. *I wish we could pull off half this stuff for our annual Christmas pageant. I wonder where they get their camels. And how do they get*

*angels that look so authentic? I love those uniforms on the Roman soldiers. The dramas at our church are painfully lame.*

The special effects got cranked up to a whole new level when they hoisted Jesus on the cross. Lightning lit up the sky. Thunder rumbled our seats. The violence against Jesus made me grimace. I couldn't watch.

The woman next to me was equally shaken. Tugging the arm of her friend, she demanded, "Why are they killing Him? What are they doing? He never did nothing bad to them."

"You're right," he said. "But you see, this was God's only way to restore a broken relationship with the rebellious human race. God will not tolerate sin. The 'wages of sin is death,' the Bible says. So, when we sin, we should die. But, instead, God sent His Son to take our punishment."

With that simple gospel presentation, she came undone. She convulsed with long, jagged sobs.

Not until Jesus exploded out of the tomb did her crying stop. As if to confirm that she was not imagining the good news, she asked, "Wait a minute! He came back to life? Jesus died and then came back to life?"

"It's true," the man confirmed.

With that, she jumped to her feet and shouted, "*Un-be-liev-able!*" Turning to me now, she wanted to make sure I didn't miss the best part of the play. "Check that out," she squealed. "He's alive again. He must have been God! He came back from the dead!"

Of course, I was quite versed in the story. I'm ashamed to admit that rather than being undone by the gospel story, I was infatuated with the lighting, lighting, acting, sound—the whole experience was breathtaking. I'm embarrassed to tell you that I have handled the story so much—preached it, studied it, explained it—that it no longer affected me as it did that woman.

*God forgive me*, I prayed as I shuffled out of the amphitheater. *I have become calloused to the greatest story ever told. Rekindle my spirit and soften my heart by Your grace.*

It is my prayer that these stories will awaken something deep inside you that tugs your soul toward a fresh and invigorating picture of Calvary. These stories capture amazing acts of courage—many of them heroic decisions to die so others might live.

In his book *Lone Survivor*, Marcus Luttrell shares one such story when he and a couple of other United States Navy SEALs battled a heavily armed force of Taliban soldiers in the mountains of Afghanistan. He would be the lone survivor, thanks to a decision made by his comrade, Lieutenant Michael Patrick Murphy.

Amid a firestorm of bullets, Murphy bravely marched into a clearing on the battlefield that day—the only place where he could get cell-phone reception and call for backup. Luttrell describes Murphy's decision: "His objective was clear: to make one last valiant attempt to save his two teammates. He made the call, made the connection. He reported our approximate position, the strength

of our enemy, and how serious the situation was.”<sup>2</sup>

As expected, the enemy shot Murphy. It was, in Luttrell’s words, “An act of supreme valor.” He says, “Lieutenant Mikey was a wonderful person and a very, very great SEAL officer. If they build a memorial to him as high as the Empire State Building, it won’t ever be high enough for me.”<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, any memorial to someone who makes such a sacrifice seems pitifully insufficient. No memorial, no book, no building, no medal of honor, no song, no story can adequately honor such love.

So I recognize at the outset of our journey to Calvary together that these stories do not fully capture the essence of the Cross—the supreme memorial of love. Ellen G. White tells us, “The cross of Christ will be the science and the song of the redeemed through all eternity. In Christ glorified they will behold Christ crucified.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, eternity begs for time to comprehend the Cross.

While these stories dimly illuminate the Cross, any insight into the sacrifice of Jesus is worthy of our attention. Perhaps your experience will be similar to mine, and you will remember the stories. In passing along the symbols of the Last Supper, Jesus said, “Do this in remembrance of me.”<sup>5</sup>

So visit the Cross and remember. Remember the blood. Remember the broken body. Remember the death. And rejoice in God’s undying love.



# His Broken Body

*He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree.*

—1 Peter 2:24

# Chapter 1

## Uncle Harold's Love Story

by Robert Surridge

**W**HY WOULD JESUS GO THROUGH WITH IT?  
Tormentors “spit in Jesus’ face and beat him with their fists. And some slapped him, jeering, ‘Prophesy to us, you Messiah! Who hit you that time?’ ” (Matthew 26:67, 68, NLT).

“They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him. They wove thorn branches into a crown and put it on his head, and they placed a reed stick in his right hand as a scepter. Then they knelt before him in mockery and taunted, ‘Hail! King of the Jews!’ And they spit on him and grabbed the stick and struck him on the head with it. When they were finally tired of mocking him, they took off the robe and put his own clothes on him again. Then they led him away to be crucified” (Matthew 27:28–32, NLT).

Why would Jesus willingly subject Himself to such inhumane torture? What kept Him pinned to the tree? It wasn’t the spikes. Nor was it the Roman soldiers.

It was love—pure and simple.

Jesus determined to cling to that cross for the sake of His family—you and me. Naked, bleeding, mangled, and thrashed, He would not let go. There was no limit to where Jesus would go in order to reconcile the lost human race to His Father.

Why?

One reason: love.



One thing I regret is not having met some of my grandparents’ brothers and sisters who died before I was born. My grandmother comes from Nottinghamshire in England, and most of the men in her family were coal miners. Many of them hardly lived long enough for my father, let alone me, to know them. Some were killed in accidents down in the mine. Others coughed themselves to an early grave from miners’ lung.

The one I really regret not having met, though he died only a few years ago, was my great-uncle Harold. Harold Gascoigne was a Nottinghamshire miner—like his brother, cousin, father, and grandfather. He was a big, strong man, but gentle, soft-spoken, and dependable.

Harold took pride in his job, though it was often mundane, dirty, and dangerous. It's probably done by a machine nowadays. But Harold worked on the floor of the mine loading the lift cage with full coal tubs. Once the cage was full, it would be cranked by a winch hundreds of feet to the surface.

Harold's job had to be done quickly and efficiently. Each trip to the top cost money and time. If the cage wasn't full, coal would bottleneck at the bottom, and a shortage would develop at the top. If Harold took too long maneuvering the filled coal tubs into the cage, the number of trips up and down the shaft in a day would be reduced.

There was also safety to consider. The coal tubs had to fit securely in the lift cage. If one were to start rolling about during the trip to the surface, the whole lift shaft assembly could become unbalanced and damaged. The sliding gates of the cage were also Harold's responsibility. If they weren't secure, well . . . the results didn't bear thinking about.

In a job like Harold's, one day was very much like the next. The only thing that seemed to indicate the passing of months and years was wear and tear on the equipment. Harold noticed one thing in particular. One of the bashed, dented, and battered coal tubs, through use, now no longer fit snugly in the cage. This caused difficulty in sending a full load. But Uncle Harold was conscientious and did his best to overcome problems caused by the deteriorating equipment.

On one particular shift, though, everything began to go wrong. It had been a hard day. The pit ponies that dragged wagons full of coal tubs to the lift cap had been acting up, the coal dust seemed more choking and blinding than usual, and the coal tubs, heavier and more awkward. Harold had just closed the cage gates on another load when he saw that one tub was dangerously askew.

The warning bell for the pull to begin sounded. Quickly he reached over the top of the lift gate to give the tub a sharp jolt into place. Harold knew the timing of the warning bell and had rightly judged that he had a few seconds to get back to safety. What he hadn't judged correctly was that someone would send the message to go ahead and winch the cage up before the warning period ended and without visually checking the cage area.

A thousand feet above, the winching gear slammed suddenly into action, and the cage jerked up into the shaft. Harold, still bent over it, went with it.

The first thing he felt was a beam, and then crosspieces of the shaft smashing into his legs and lower back. As the shaft narrowed, these blows dragged him backward and down along the side of the cage. But he held on like grim death. His left hand managed to grab on to a part of the cage, and that, along with tangled clothing wrapped in the bars, stopped him from being dragged out completely.

The cage stopped.

It was more than a quarter of the way up. Harold's shocked workmates had finally managed to get a message to the top ordering them to stop the lift cage.

But what now? Harold was beyond reach. The operator tried to reverse the cage, but it seemed stuck. Slowly the miners realized that Harold's body must be jamming the cage.

The team leader below shone a powerful torch beam up the shaft. He could barely see the cage and Harold's body hanging off one side. The miners gasped. He must be dead.

"Silence!" the leader demanded.

They heard a moan.

"Harold?"

Another moan.

The team leader knew that Harold had to be desperately injured, and that the rest of the trip would probably kill him. But even though it was farther up than down, Harold would have to go to the surface eventually to get proper medical attention. The leader made a decision. The best thing was to get him up now—no matter what state he was in.

They passed the message up the phone to the surface. "Proceed, dead slow!" The miners at the bottom heard the cage jerk upward. A moment later something fell at their feet. It was a thumb.

The cage went up at the slowest pace possible, but there was still not enough room between the shaft wall and the cage for Harold's body. His back, legs, and limp right arm were gradually scraped raw by each beam. It was somewhere on that agonizing journey that Harold lost two more fingers from his right hand. The pain was agonizing. And the cage seemed to be actively trying to shake him loose, while the shaft wall tried to snatch him off and drag him down.

But it was something very specific that gave Harold the ability to cling to the cage as it dragged him upward. Dreadful, heartbreaking pictures flashed through Harold's mind. He kept seeing the face of his wife, Beatrix, and his young son, Trevor. First as the news of his death reached them, then at his graveside, then being evicted from their home, his wife a widow and his son an orphan. He couldn't, he *wouldn't*, let that happen.

His family needed him; they were more important than the pain, the weariness, and the fear. He loved his wife and son passionately. He had to see them again.

It would have been such a relief to let go. It would have been so easy, but his family was everything to him. For them he would endure, for them he would hang on, for them he would take the pain and punishment no matter how long it took.

When the cage reached the surface, a half hour after it started its terrible journey, Harold was barely conscious. He was almost naked, his clothes torn away by the shaft wall. His right arm was smashed and twisted double, both his legs and hips were broken, and he had lost two fingers and the thumb from his right hand.



But his left hand was locked solid to the lift cage, and it took two burly miners to pry it free. Harold had hung on; he had not let go. It was the power of love and the true grit of family loyalty that had given him the strength to cling to that cage. For the sake of his family he had held on.<sup>1</sup>

