

PROLOGUE

We live in interesting times to say the least—politically, economically, socially, environmentally, and technologically. Trends are changing and evolving at such a perplexing rate, that it can be hard to keep up with “what’s new.” Environmentally, we’re seeing weather patterns develop that extend to extremes—from virtually incomprehensible flooding, earthquakes, wildfires, and rising temperatures, to exceptionally cold weather creating freezing conditions that haven’t been experienced in some regions of the earth in over two decades. Politically, it seems our world is in a constant state of negotiations for peace. Global leaders fight for positions of dominance as mankind watches from afar, fearful of what the outcome might be. Words like *peace*, *harmony*, and *reconciliation* are consistently discussed across almost every media platform, but the realization of such order is very distant.

The global economy continues to be in a state of uncertainty. Individual and corporate financial vulnerabilities are mounting which can cause a weakness in possible growth. While there is hope projected for a universal economic boost, its sustainability is questionable.

Socially, we live in a day where common sense, wisdom, truth, conviction, and the discernment to correctly and respectfully state our convictions seem lost. Decency and reverence have been replaced by physical acts and communication of radical, unkind, and evil extremes. A mature sense of balance and response dictated by love has seemingly been replaced by reactionary outbursts that continually create a divide rather than unify.

We live in a world that longs for peace, but screaming “PEACE!” from the rafters isn’t solving the problem. Passionate cries filled with anger, bitterness, and vengeful spite, aimed toward individuals who we’ve become convinced are dismantling our worldview, is not ushering in a lasting solution. Soon we come to find that inevitably another “wrong” will occur, and the cycle starts all over again.

Core values are changing at a rapid pace. It feels as if we are being tossed around by a raging ocean tide, and the mature response to “agree to disagree” has all but been washed away. We’d rather leave our emotions and feelings unchecked if someone challenges our opinion or belief—especially when it comes to an ideology we value and hold dear.

In this day and age, social media dominates our attention and has become a consuming source of influence, leading us to think that the perception and opinion of others, in one way or another, is what sets our standard of truth. How we are perceived is where we find the foundation of our acceptance. Common sense has lost its measure of worth, and absolute truth is being pushed to the side.

As these ever-evolving trends and behaviors have become all the more prevalent in our society, we’ve seen an increase in

fear, anxiety, frustration, anger, and even hate. Look around. Look into the world that surrounds you. Is peace prevailing? The more everyone becomes righteous in their own eyes, the more such self-driven and self-gratifying pride becomes a dividing line. If peace and unity are the goals of humanity, we are failing.

Is there hope? Is there hope for real transformation? As the people of God, what can we do about it? As Christ followers are we reflecting a current of change within our culture? Are we portraying something different? Have we intentionally set ourselves apart? What is our standard of truth? Are we living out the commandment given in Colossians 3:12 when it says, “So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience”?

Or, as the people of God, have we allowed our culture to define us, individually and collectively? In regards to what we value, has fame and popular perception become an unintentional pursuit and platform within the body of Christ?

Concerning foundational and biblical truth, have we become fearful of teaching and holding to the standards that God has ordained and laid forth by the authority of His word? Or have we become more concerned with being socially acceptable and likable—and, as some mistakenly mark it, *relatable*? And the larger question at heart: Have we ultimately allowed ourselves to come under the authority of man rather than that of God?

The reality of surrender in our lives comes down to that one question. Man or God? It’s literally a question of authority. We’re all surrendered to something. We’ve all raised the white

flag and given into a ruling, authoritative set of thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors that are defining us and defining the influence we have on those around us.

Those thoughts and beliefs reveal where we find our worth. They reveal the authentic motives behind our pursuits. They uncover the truth of what or who we really value. Maybe some of us have forgotten that in due time we'll be held accountable for what we've worked to construct.

Individually, we need to ask ourselves: To whom or to what are we surrendered? Who we are individually works to make up the church as a whole collectively. So, our individual commitments of our time and our resources ultimately determine how the church will operate. The priorities that are lived out in our waking moments are laying the foundation of our impact in society as single and communal disciples of Christ. As followers of Jesus, His word is our authority and we are to surrender to His commands. God before man.

When writing for an orchestra, the solitary goal of a composer is to take every individual instrument and bring the different voices together to create a (hopefully) beautiful song. Each voice has a place, but there will be one voice that soars above all the others if the composition is written correctly. That voice is the melody. The melody and the instrument or instruments that carry the melody take center stage, while the rest of the orchestra works together to gloriously reveal the beauty of the series of notes that need to be heard.

As a composition begins to build in intensity and all the voices start working together, it can be easy for the melody to get lost. So, written within the music are specific dynamics for each instrument. In other words, the instruments are

prioritized within an authority structure. The authority that sets the standard of each orchestral voicing is the melody. Without the melody, all the other notes become a parade of sound without direction. Melody comes before harmony.

As followers of Jesus, obedience to God, His word, and His kingdom comes first. As is stated in Matthew 6:33, “But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness.”

This is our aim in real surrender. In God’s righteousness we find peace (see Isa. 32:17) and are no longer conformed to the pattern of this world (see Rom. 12:2). We find that we are set apart.

To influence the world around us, God’s authority must rule in our hearts. He is the melody to our song. To individually come under God’s authority brings unity. And much like the different instruments of an orchestra, in unity there’s still diversity, freedom, and power.¹ The parts of the body of Christ don’t have the same appearance or function, but they are all significant, have a need, are linked together, and work toward the same goal. In the church, there are purposes for each member—designed for the function of the body as guided by the head, which is Christ. They work together and work in harmony with the creative purpose of God the Father.

Therefore we have a united purpose. The purpose is maturity in Christ, while the ultimate goal of being is to be Christlike. This is the primary pursuit and equipping nature of surrender. The more we possess the character and mind of Jesus, the more the unity of the Spirit will be experienced—and thus the more God’s peace will abound in our hearts, in our lives, and in our sphere of influence in the world. This is surrender.

—John Stanley



ONE

A BIG RAFT, SOME WHITE WATER, AND ONE FREAKED OUT LITTLE KID

My mom and dad are great parents—supportive, encouraging, and inspiring. They gave me strong spiritual guidance as a child and taught me how to be creative. Our occasional family trips doubled as a “life lesson.” Whether we went camping, hiking, hunting, or on road trips, my parents made sure each adventure or activity taught us a valuable lesson regarding the truths of life and the purpose of our existence. One of those excursions was to the Ocoee River in Tennessee. I survived the first of many traumatic life experiences while I was on that trip.

At age twelve, I was a little guy with not much “meat on the bones,” as my grandfather would say. I weighed about seventy pounds, maybe a little less. Combine that with a huge, bouncy rubber raft; a big, yellow paddle taller than I was; and some even bigger white-water rapids and, well, you get the picture. It was shaping up to be a “see ya later” kind of ride.

We pulled into the dusty, rocky parking lot of a local rafting company headquartered in a rustic log cabin deep in the woods, about five miles from the Ocoee River. We piled out of our maroon minivan and saw the river guides who, despite living on a river for a whole summer, were surprisingly clean cut. The college- and adult-aged men had a clean shave, washed clothing that wasn't faded or torn, and hair that had recently been cut—a seemingly good, grounded, and acceptable group.

Except for one. In my child mind, he looked like a serial killer. He had a good bit of scruff on his face and long, greasy, curly brown hair that hung just below his shoulders. I was certain it hadn't been washed since his childhood. He was a bigger man, standing tall at about 6'3" with tree-trunk legs and muscular, beefed-up arms. To me, he looked scary as all get out. This guy was someone you're taught to run away from when you're twelve years old, not someone you'd entrust your life to.

Well, wouldn't you know it? We ended up with that guy as our guide.

Now at twelve, my prayer life was clearly growing. Prayers that would be considered "begging" were few and far between. Yet the moment I found out he was our guide and our only chance of survival, I pleaded to God in every way to be released from the nightmare that had just begun. But sometimes, no matter how hard we beg, there's a purpose for why we are where we are. In hindsight, I think God probably smiled, maybe even laughed a little and said, "You'll be fine." Did I feel that way? Nope.

Then it got worse.

We loaded onto the bus and made our way down some curvy, tar-paved roads that led to the river. The driver parked

and opened the doors, and we began to file out. I took one look at the watercourse ahead and my stomach dropped to my feet. I thought, *We were brought here to die.* My parents have thought it all through. They have the killer, they have the whitewater, and death is sure to follow. Great “lesson,” Mom and Dad. Thanks a lot. We love you, too!

Little did I know it would turn out fine, but not until we finished the scariest ride of my life. Everything in between the start and finish line of this little journey is still unnerving when I think back through it all. But in the midst of my personal turmoil, the lesson had already begun.

So there we were, standing up to our knees in the frigid water. I was just trying to catch my breath and calm myself down as horrid thoughts raced through my mind. What was going to happen to us? As the self-absorbed tween, I also wondered, what is going to happen to me? How long will it take for me to fly out of the raft and drown? I watched the white-water caps slam against the rocks as the river curved a long path to what seemed like certain doom. I was done for.

It didn't look like fun. In fact, it seemed evil. Yet there my parents stood with huge smiles across their faces. My dad was “livin' it up!” as he would say on virtually any adventurous journey. As I stood with my eyes locked on the terror before me, I made sure my life jacket was secure, my helmet was fastened, and the paddle grips were in the right place. Then I took a deep breath and climbed aboard the raft.

Now because I didn't weigh much, I was put in the back. Heavier people were placed in the front to help keep the raft from flipping front to back when we hit harder rapids, like those ranked class V. I attempted to secure my feet in the grips

underneath the seating in front of me, though I didn't feel it would do much good. In my mind, placing such a little guy in the back of the raft didn't seem to be a great idea. With one unsteady bounce, I could shoot up and out like a cannonball on some kind of raging rant of destruction.

Oh, and the worst part? The “killer guide man” who was scarier than anyone I'd ever seen sat right behind me. His booming voice could have caused anyone to freeze so naturally, when we started moving down the river and he screamed, “DIG!” I froze. It evidently caught his attention that I was doing nothing, so he calmly leaned into my ear and politely said in that scruffy tone, “When I tell you to dig, boy, you dig. Got it?” Now, I don't know about you, but when someone who looks like he could snap you into kindling leans into your little ear and commands you do what he says, you either pee your pants or you dig. I chose the latter.

As I attempted the first of many failed “digs” in my panicked state, my paddle was barely reaching the water. So my dig, as it was supposed to be, was nothing more than a dip. Still, terrorized and humiliated as I was, I screamed at everyone else at the top of my lungs to “DIG GUYS!” Later, as we made it farther down the river, I'm sure someone in our family wanted to put me out of my misery.

As we continued the terror ride, our guide gave strong directives through every twist and turn. If they weren't followed to the detail or with the necessary tenacity, he made it crystal clear that we would certainly be in some big trouble. All were doing their part, pulling their weight, except me. I was petrified.

As we approached one of the larger rapids, a few photographers hired by the rafting company perched themselves on the

rocks to take pictures of the rafters—you know, so everyone could remember the day they almost met their Maker. Naturally, being the performer I am, I smiled at the cameras and completely ignored our current situation. The picture of our crew details the irony: Everyone else is fighting to make sure they survive, gripping their paddles, faces disheveled as they look steadfastly at the river path ahead. And then there's me, smiling with my paddle not even close to the water. It looks like I was photoshopped or something. Remember the song lyrics, "One of these things is not like the other"? I was that thing.

By the gracious hand of God, we made it down the river. Yes, we survived and finally arrived at our destination. I do believe it was one of the happiest moments of my life. As we gathered on the bus and began to head back, my parents asked me and my brother, "So what did you guys learn about life from that river ride?" I wanted to answer cleverly, "How to die." Before the words could escape my mouth, my parents laid out their reasoning, plain and simple. Their words were etched in my mind and are still with me to this day: "It's all about surrender."

