

Introduction

To a certain extent, we all experience some kind of suffering and need help to survive. Over the decades as a student of the Scriptures and a pastor, I have been on a stimulating journey seeking to accurately identify and properly interpret the many pieces and stages of my life, and use them for God's glory. I have sought to create meaning out of pain, perspective out of rejection, and fine wine out of very bitter waters.

The apostle Paul states, "If what was built on the foundation survives the fire, the builder will receive a reward" (1 Cor. 3:14, GNT). In the light of that, how does one use a variety of negative experiences and turn them into the fine wine of eternal significance?

Significance, like the making of fine wine, is all a matter of time. Experiences that are forgotten, rejected, disregarded, or wasted are of little significance. What is remembered, properly interpreted, reconstructed and effectively used for eternity, becomes of great significance. Paul wrote to Timothy,

Significance, like the making of fine wine, is all a matter of time.

“Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness . . . since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come” (1 Timothy 4:7–8, NASB). I continue to be intrigued by the interesting story found in John chapter 2 in the Bible, about Jesus and His mother, Mary.

Let’s read the story in John 2:1–11.

On the third day there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus also was invited to the wedding with his disciples. When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to him, “They have no wine.” And Jesus said to her, “Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come.” His mother said to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.”

Now there were six stone water jars there for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to the servants, “Fill the jars with water.” And they filled them up to the brim. And he said to them, “Now draw some out and take it to the master of the feast.” So they took it. When the master of the feast tasted the water now become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the master of the

feast called the bridegroom and said to him, “Everyone serves the good wine first, and when people have drunk freely, then the poor wine. But you have kept the good wine until now.” This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him.

When Jesus, His mother, Mary, and His twelve disciples attended a wedding in Cana of Galilee, the wine ran out. Why was the shortage of wine (a potentially embarrassing situation for the newly married couple) brought to Mary’s attention? Possibly Mary was related to either the bride or the groom. In any case, Mary in turn brought the shortage to Jesus’ attention. Jesus’ initial response highlights two things:

1. He did not think or feel that the shortage of wine was really His concern.
2. He did not think or feel that this was His time for revealing Himself and openly pursuing certain aspects of His anointing and His ministry (i.e., performing a miracle).

In spite of Jesus’ response, and right within His hearing, Mary instructed the servants to do whatever Jesus directed them to do. Being put on the spot, Jesus instructed the servants to fill six large stone jars with water, and then to pour out some of the water and to serve it to the master of the feast. When the master of the feast drank the water (now turned to wine), he was shocked and surprised, and told the bridegroom, “You’ve saved the best wine for last!”

Interestingly, though up to this point His disciples had been selected and had left much to follow Him, it was only after they experienced this miracle that the Bible says, “his disciples believed in him.”

Turning water into wine was His first visible miracle and divine operation. The significant insight is that Jesus’ first miracle and supernatural act came as He sought to address a simple human need and concern (saving the bridegroom from social embarrassment). This was the beginning of His ministry, and His mother Mary helped Him to make this happen.

Life confronts you and me with many different experiences, many kinds of waters. Some are pleasant, some not; some are clear, some muddy; some are joyful, some painful; some are sweet, some bitter. How we address these many different waters definitely influences the quality of our lives and the effectiveness of our leadership.

The passage describes how Jesus turned water into wine at the urging of His mother. It shows that He had someone in His life—Mary—who believed in Him, His calling, His anointing, His potential, and His future. It was her pushing Him to act in a very unusual situation that enabled the very disciples He had selected and were following Him to really believe in Him. She also pushed Him beyond what was then His present paradigm and self-perception.

Everybody wants to become something, to accomplish something, but sometimes we just need someone to give us a little push. Mary, the mother of Jesus, propelled Jesus into His hour when she pushed Him to address the shortage of wine at a wedding in Cana.

Everybody wants to become something, to accomplish something, but sometimes we just need someone to give us a little push.

I relate this story to the many life-impacting experiences in my journey and how God used all of them to push my family and me into our present hour. Indeed, anyone can cooperate with God and allow Him to turn all our setbacks into setups. As we actively pursue the possibilities and opportunities of God's preordained destiny for us, we will always have to pay a price, but it will be worth it.

You and I have a series of big decisions to make. As we look at our lives, it is easy to focus simply on the shortages, the challenges, the perceived inadequacies, the disappointments, and the many negative experiences. We must reject the emotional urge to allow our past experiences to push us into spending our lives living with and wallowing in painful memories and bitter waters.

The foundational illustration of this book is the Wedding at Cana story found in the book of John, chapter 2 when Jesus and His disciples attended a wedding ceremony and experienced a critical need that required immediate attention—they ran out of wine during the reception. When provided with this information Mary, the mother of Jesus, told Jesus and asked him to do something about it. The way in which Jesus handled this need has given me significant insights in my spiritual growth. You will find many reflections of the story in this book and prayerfully you will be pushed to a quality of thought and action necessary for the fulfillment of your needs and the needs around you.

It is my hope that, through the vignettes of my life in the chapters that follow, you will gain insight in how you, too, can overcome difficult situations and fulfill your life's purpose.

Wisdom for Living

1. Who are some of the people who helped to discover and to empower you?
2. What were some of your first reactions when they were pushing you?
3. As you look back at your life, what are some of the things for which you are most grateful?

Chapter 1

My Early Life: Very Bitter Water

I was born into an impoverished home in what was then British Guiana, the only British-controlled and English-speaking country in South America. (Today, it is known as Guyana.) My father did not live with us and was never there for us. I remember getting a full glass of milk only once a year at Christmas and a whole egg only on my birthday.

For the first fourteen years of my life, I slept on the floor of our house each night. Some time ago, I was visiting two of my brothers in the living room of one of their homes. As we sat there reminiscing, we suddenly came to the realization that the living room we were sitting in was bigger than the entire house in which our family of seven lived.

For the first fourteen years of my life, I slept on the floor of our house each night.

I was just ten years old when the Missionary Board of the Church of God in Anderson, Indiana, sent the Rev. Herman Smith and his beautiful wife, Mrs. Lavera Smith,¹ to be long-term missionaries in what was then British Guiana, the only British controlled and English-speaking country in South America. It is presently known as Guyana. Before their arrival, the Rev. George Jeffrey, the strong national leader who had affiliated his work with the Church of God in Anderson Indiana, had passed away. The Smiths moved very quickly in establishing new outreaches of the Church of God in the country.

Guyana is divided into three counties; Essequibo, Demerara, and Berbice. Its population is made up of six main ethnic groups: Amerindians, Africans, Indians, Europeans, Portuguese, and Chinese. As there were already churches in the county of Demerara where the capital city Georgetown is located, the Smiths moved sought to develop congregations in the other counties as well. Many Indian families in the the Corentyne District² of the Berbice County of the country are descendants of indentured laborers from India and are practicing Hindis. An outstanding member of their community, Ramalingum Armogum, was converted to Jesus Christ. He was discipled by Pastor Smith, became a Christian leader, and pioneered several congregations in his community.

Seeing the Need and Doing It Right

In the city of Georgetown,³ where I lived, the Smiths found an old dilapidated building that the Rev. George Jeffrey had

erected several decades earlier as a church and home for the aged at Bel Air Street, in the Albouystown southwest section of the city. The residents had since moved and abandoned the building. I was among the many little boys who regularly threw rocks through the already broken and glassless windows so as to watch the dozens of bats fly out. I'm sure when the Smiths first saw this building, they wondered if anything good could come out of this. I am struck by how their subsequent restoration of the building exemplified how they seized the opportunity to turn very, very bitter waters into wine.

The couple immediately focused on the community's children and youth. Their strategy was to create and empower capable young people for God's kingdom—to reach children, lead them to a life-changing walk with Jesus Christ, and train them to be responsible young people who would later become leaders and establish families in the church. With this in mind, they did an assessment, organized quickly, and built a new multiroom facility that became the first church in the entire country with Sunday school rooms for each children's age group.

Their strategy was to create and empower capable young people for God's kingdom.

After building the new church, the Smiths expertly planned the nation's first vacation Bible school (VBS). That August, hundreds of children from that poor neighborhood gathered to attend something they had never experienced

before. Since all the children were on vacation from school, it was a tremendous opportunity to lead them to the Lord.

Touched by the Ministry of Love

At age eleven, I was attending a Roman Catholic school in the city of Georgetown. My entire family was Roman Catholic, and from the catechism I knew that attending a non-Catholic church was a mortal sin. Of course, there were varieties of sins, but a mortal sin was a big one, and without an act of confession to the priest, it could cause you to end up in hell.

I remember that bright, sunny summer morning when the newly renovated Church of God held the first VBS session. The church heavily marketed the event to the community months before using flyers, posters, banners, and door-to-door visitation. As a result, hundreds of children showed up for this brand-new experience.

And yet, I was totally unaware that the church building had been renovated or that a new congregation had begun in the community. I knew nothing about this new event called “vacation Bible school.” I simply happened to be at home one day when I heard the singing of children and the playing of music on the street.

Naturally, I ran out to see what was happening, and to my surprise, hundreds of children and a number of adults were marching, singing, handing out flyers and balloons, and inviting neighborhood children to follow the group to a fun time. I followed the procession that led right to the church. Everyone went in—except me. I stood outside, thinking that it seemed to be so much fun. Everyone seemed to be excited, and two adults, apparently teachers, kept inviting me to come in.

As I stood outside the church, terrified to go in (as I said before, my Catholic catechism had taught me it was a mortal sin to enter a Protestant church), I could hear them reciting Bible verses and singing the song,

Jesus loves the little children,
All the children of the world.
Red and yellow, black and white.
All are precious in His sight.
Jesus loves the little children of the world.

Two days later, Pastor Smith and the teachers organized the children to again march around the streets of my neighborhood, singing songs. Imagine hundreds of children walking through the streets with music and flyers, inviting others to join the procession.

Despite my reluctance, I wanted to find out why these children were so happy and having so much fun. Slowly and hesitantly, I joined the procession and found myself marching with the group to the church building and into the room assigned to my age group (nine-to-twelve-year-olds). As I entered the building, I convinced myself that if my priest found out about my participation, I would just tell him, “Father, I was with the children, and I was pushed into the building.”

The VBS sessions ran from 9 a.m. to noon and included learning new songs and memorizing scriptures, which I thoroughly enjoyed. It was a fascinating experience and the longest children’s event that I had ever participated in. This became the beginning of a sequence of experiences that transformed my life.