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VOLUME 1 of *Tyndale Voices* features thought-provoking content from books on diversity and race relations. As you read, listen to the heart of each author and respond to the challenges offered through their words.



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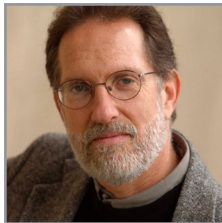
13 DAYS IN FERGUSON

ON AUGUST 14, 2014, five days after the fatal shooting of Michael Brown ignited riots throughout the city of Ferguson, Missouri, the nation found an unlikely hero in Captain Ron Johnson of the Missouri State Highway Patrol. Charged with the herculean task of restoring peace between an angry African American community and the local police, Johnson, a 30-year law enforcement veteran and an African American, did the unthinkable: He took off his bulletproof vest and walked with the protesters.

In *13 Days in Ferguson*, Johnson shares for the first time his view of what happened during the turbulent days he spent stabilizing the city of Ferguson, and the extraordinary impact those two historic weeks had on his faith, his approach to leadership, and on what he perceives to be the most viable solution to the issues of racism and prejudice in America. Early in chapter 3, “Day 3—‘These People,’” the growing crowds and unrest seem inevitably to be leading to a confrontation with the police. Then Johnson has a conversation with a trooper, which sends him into deep reflection over some of the issues that make finding a solution so difficult.



CAPTAIN RON JOHNSON had been serving with the Missouri State Highway Patrol for 27 years when he was tapped by Governor Jay Nixon to take control of security operations in riot-driven Ferguson in August 2014. Hailed as a hero by Mike Huckabee and dubbed Captain America by *The Nation*, Ron is credited with restoring peace to the fire-gutted streets of Ferguson. A lifelong Missouri native, Ron is married and has two adult children.



ALAN EISENSTOCK is the author of fifteen books, most recently *Hang Time: My Life in Basketball*, written with NBA legend Elgin Baylor. He lives in Pacific Palisades, California.

DAY 3
MONDAY, AUGUST 11, 2014

“These People”

Empathy must be cultivated.

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON
TEARS WE CANNOT STOP

Lying in bed, coming out of a fractured daze, I'm not sure if I'm dreaming. Images flicker furiously in front of my eyes—Michael Brown's body lying in the street, protesters clogging West Florissant, rows of police in riot gear, the QuikTrip in flames.

Michael Brown's body lying in the street.

I gasp and rise to a sitting position. The images fade, replaced by the familiarity of my bedroom. I feel numb. And then a thick sense of doom grips me.

Life as I know it has changed.

Today I will not report to my usual job as a troop commander in the Missouri State Highway Patrol, overseeing more than three hundred employees dedicated to the primary mission of promoting highway safety. Instead I will report to Ferguson, to Chief Jon Belmar, the incident commander.

Incident commander.

The word feels flimsy, inadequate.

I blink myself into reality.

Reality.

I'm not sure what that means anymore.

As I lower my feet to the floor and rise, allowing my legs to carry me toward the bathroom, a heaviness descends. Something enormous weighs me down, a gravity I cannot grasp.

• • •

At the command post, I'm assigned to provide administrative support for Chief Belmar. One of my first responsibilities is to designate and deploy groups of troopers and one of our SWAT teams to Ferguson. From this point forward, I will coordinate whatever trooper presence Chief Belmar requests and keep my command staff informed of new developments. When not on the phone, I will attend briefings with representatives from the two other main agencies who have been assigned here—St. Louis City and St. Louis County.

Jon Belmar maintains a calm and steady presence, even though he's operating in a well of tension, uncertainty, and—at times—chaos. The sheer number of people on the scene threatens to overload our circuits. In addition to an ever-changing array of protesters, citizens, and media gathered outside, representatives from more than fifty law enforcement agencies have arrived in Ferguson, many of them self-deployed officers who have come to offer their help.

The morning ticks by. We discuss preparations—what we might do *if* and *when*. We consider various contingencies, with everyone from our assembled group of experienced law-enforcement leaders offering suggestions, tactics, and potential responses for both best-case possibilities and worst-case scenarios.

Nothing feels familiar or even exactly appropriate. I sense that Jon, like the rest of us, is struggling to find his footing. No one here has ever faced anything remotely like what we saw last night. We are in uncharted territory.

Somebody refers to the National Incident Management System (NIMS), a set of procedures put out by the Federal Emergency

Management Agency (FEMA). We have adhered to the first step of the NIMS guidelines—setting up a command post—but last night’s protests seem to take us beyond the parameters of the NIMS protocol. During a break from the briefings, I wander through the small command post, feeling on edge, antsy, and far away from what is happening outside.

Too far away.

• • •

In the afternoon, I drive up West Florissant and pull over to what had been the QuikTrip gas station less than twenty-four hours ago. I want to see what remains in the light of day. I squint into the sun and see a charred husk of a building. A few people mill around the still-smoking structure, taking pictures with their phones.

Across the street, several business owners sweep up glass and debris outside their shattered front windows and splintered doors. Some nail plywood sheets over the openings. Others walk through their stores and back out to the sidewalk, shaking their heads in disbelief, their shoes crunching through the shards of glass. I hear a smattering of voices. They talk about the damage, the looters, the night. They look shell shocked. To me, West Florissant looks like a bombed-out street in Iraq or Syria.

I look back at the QuikTrip, and a moment of disbelief swamps me.
Has this really happened?

I picture myself filling up my car at those gas pumps or buying gum or Life Savers at the counter inside, strolling down the street, stepping into a store to buy a soda.

I suddenly feel violated. The pain I felt oozing from others on the street last night is my pain. The protests, the *unrest*, are happening to me—in my heart and in my home. I wear the uniform and the badge, and I’m sworn to protect and serve and keep the peace. But Ferguson is not some isolated, foreign dot on a map. It’s my hometown. My place. Ferguson belongs to me. It lives within me.

All day long I hear the undercurrent of a distant, approaching drum-beat.

Footsteps.

More and more footsteps.

As each hour passes, more people arrive—first the protesters and then the police, the press, and the politicians. Some have come because they believe they must be here—including a state senator, whose presence surprises me. Others I believe have come only to be seen. Three days after Michael Brown’s death, Ferguson has become a kind of landing point.

We have chosen to wage the war here.

Nobody says those words out loud, but nobody has to—it’s what I feel, what everyone feels. The nation has chosen Ferguson as a battleground. The name alone has become an instant symbol, a statement.

More people arrive by the minute, by the carload, by the busload, and West Florissant teems with protesters. As night falls, the anger and pain simmer, boil, and then explode, like a lid flying off of an untended pressure cooker. The heat of the summer day scorching the pavement equals the heat of the anger pulsing through the mass of people who now begin to advance. That surging anger—that pain—has become their engine.

A day later, still no new information about the shooter has surfaced. The community narrative remains unrefuted: *A young, unarmed black man was murdered by the police.*

That cannot happen here. But it has.

• • •

By late afternoon, the fury returns. Protesters begin to chant, “Whose streets? *Our* streets!”

Rioters mix with peaceful protesters, and soon the police can’t tell the difference. Rioters heave bottles. They sling rocks. They fire guns in the air. Shirts off, fists waving, voices raised, the people advance in waves with signs held high, chanting, “Hands up, don’t shoot!”

The police on the streets in their camouflage riot gear form a human barricade. They brace themselves behind their shields, like soldiers preparing for battle. I know what's running through their minds, but they don't know what to say. They don't have the right words, the right sentiments, the right experience to draw from. They want to voice the confusion they feel as they try to do what they see as their responsibility.

We didn't burn the QuikTrip.

We didn't loot the stores.

We're here to restore order.

I see both sides. I belong to both sides. But there shouldn't *be* sides. Taking sides implies a winner and a loser. There are no winners here. Even if some police see it as a battle to be won, I see only a no-win situation.

I feel as if I'm floundering, trying to figure this out. There are no by-the-book rules to guide us. NIMS doesn't seem to be enough. Or even right. Nobody has written a manual for Ferguson.

• • •

Before the officers lob tear gas into the crowd that gathers near the QuikTrip, and before they shoot PepperBalls and beanbag rounds into a mob on West Florissant, I drift in and out of pockets of people. Referring to Michael Brown's shooting, young men shout, "We want answers!" But other young men, seeing me, approach and don't talk about Michael Brown at all. They talk about their lives. One says, "You don't understand. We don't have *jobs!*"

At first, their pleas knock me back. "I do understand," I say after a moment. "I'm listening."

"No, man, you can't understand. You *have* a job."

"Talk to me. Tell me."

Before our conversation can continue, these young men are swallowed up by the crowd, or they see the police advancing and run. Another young man, who looks to be in his early twenties, about the

same age as my son, comes right up to me, stares at me for a moment, and then says, "Sir."

"Yes?"

"For the first time in my life, I feel that I'm part of something."

I find his words heartbreaking.

Before I can respond, I feel someone's hand on my shoulder.

"We have to go."

I turn and face a trooper I know well, a man I have served with for twenty-seven years. A white man. He and his wife and Lori and I have often attended work functions together. We've laughed and enjoyed each other's company. I consider him a friend.

"What?" I say, not understanding.

"We have to go."

"Why?"

I catch a whiff of it then. His fear. Oozing out and engulfing us both. Nearby, more people amass, spilling onto the street. I sense people moving in behind us. Troopers.

"You're comfortable here with these people," he says. "A lot of us are not."

These people.

I can't speak. I feel as if he has slapped me across the face. I start to say something but hold myself back. The trooper outranks me. We need to talk. But we cannot have that talk right now, in the middle of all this chaos. The trooper pivots away toward two other officers. I see a third trooper, another white man, who shifts his weight uncomfortably. I can tell he has heard our conversation because he looks away, his eyes fixed on the pavement.

"You okay?" I ask him.

He says nothing. He keeps his head down.

The first trooper rushes toward me again. "I told you we have to leave."

At this moment, I know that everything in my life has changed. This

man, my coworker, a man I've called a friend for twenty-seven years, no longer sees *me*. He sees through my uniform. He sees only the color of my skin.

I can no longer help myself. Heart racing, I say, "What do you mean by *these people*?"

"I'm saying that the people here are not going to accept me the way they accept you."

"*These people*," I say again softly.

"You're being overly—" He tilts his head and glares at me. "Are you calling me a bigot? Do you think I'm a bigot?"

I don't want to answer him. I don't want to continue this conversation. I want to flee. I turn away before I say something I will regret, but I know I've already lost a friend. Then I realize: *He has never truly been a friend.*

We drive back to the command post in silence. As we ride, a scene from my childhood flashes before me: I am in grade school. My family has moved from an all-black neighborhood in St. Louis City to an all-white neighborhood in the suburbs. We are, in fact, the only black family on our street, and my brother, sister, and I are the only black kids in our new school. My first week in third grade, one of the kids calls me the N-word. I've heard the word before, of course, but only from other black kids who said it in a familiar, almost joking way. I have never heard the word directed at me with hatred.

That's how I feel driving back to command with that trooper. He hadn't used the word, but he might as well have.

We pull up in front of the command post, and I storm out of the car. I hurry into the storefront that serves as our on-site headquarters and find my boss talking on the telephone. I mouth that I need to speak to him, and I pace the room, fidgety, on edge, as I wait for him to complete his call. I rub my hand over my shaved head, and it comes up slick. Even with the air-conditioning on full blast I can feel myself sweating. The trooper steps inside the door and walks over to me.

“You didn’t answer my question,” he says. “I want to know. Do you think I’m a bigot?”

I feel my face burn. “When you say *these people*,” I reply as evenly as I can, “you’re answering the question yourself.”

He starts to speak, but I cut him off. “You may not even be conscious of what you said, or the words you used, but certain words have certain meanings. The meaning here was clear.”

He looks at me hard. He says nothing, but his eyes narrow, his pupils becoming like pinpricks.

“Emotions are high right now,” I say. “People are upset. There’s a lot of anger. But there is no way we should have left that street.”

“I felt uncomfortable—”

“With *these people*—”

“YES.”

Speaking barely above a whisper, my voice cracking, I say, “So, if I didn’t have my uniform on, if you didn’t know me—”

I don’t want to continue. I want to end this conversation. I want to get away from him. Instead, I lean in and continue.

“I was talking to some young men out there. We *need* to talk to them. We need to hear them out. We can’t run away from them.”

He stares at me and I stare back. And then my entire body sags. I feel as if my world has tipped over.

My thoughts jumbled, my anger swelling, I spin and head toward the bathroom—passing my boss, who has finished his phone call and has been listening to us. I shove my shoulder into the bathroom door, duck inside, and lock the door.

I pace a few steps, drop into a crouch, and start to cry.

I lower my head into my chest and weep.

I weep over the loss of a friend.

I weep for a world that no longer exists.

I weep because I feel completely and brutally alone.

And then I mutter a prayer.

Please, Lord. Help me.

These are the only words I can find.

• • •

I dab a wet paper towel over my eyes as I study myself in the mirror. I look ravaged. My eyes are filmy and bloodshot. I sigh, crumple the paper towel, toss it into the trash, and walk out of the bathroom. My boss is waiting outside the door.

“I overheard the two of you,” he says.

“I know,” I say. “I’m sorry.”

“No, I’m sorry.”

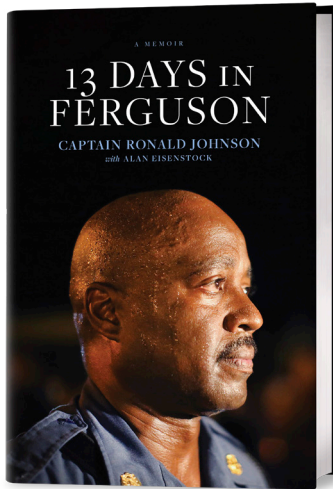
“I just . . . I didn’t like how he kept saying *these people*.”

My boss nods, and I can see that his eyes are bloodshot too.

“Ron,” he says, “this is just starting. A lot of people are afraid.”

We look at each other, and then the two of us, my boss and I, two seasoned highway patrol troopers, a black man and a white man, grab each other and hug.

And then we both begin to cry.



The days and nights that followed were the most trying of Johnson's life—professionally, emotionally, and spiritually. Officers in his own command called him a traitor. Lifelong friends stopped speaking to him. The media questioned his every decision. Alone at the center of the firestorm, with only his family and his faith to cling to, Johnson persevered in his belief that the only way to effectively bridge the divide between black and blue is to—literally—walk across it. Be sure to read the twelve remaining days of Johnson's challenging experience.

<https://www.tyndale.com/p/13-days-in-ferguson/9781496416575>

UNDER OUR SKIN

IN THIS CHALLENGING LOOK AT RACE, BIAS, AND JUSTICE, Benjamin Watson speaks from his deepest heart to articulate what many of us think and feel. Part memoir and part social commentary, *Under Our Skin* offers a look at both sides of the race debate and appeals to the power and possibility of faith as a step toward healing. It's a bold new path for us to follow as we come together to talk about the truths, myths, and realities of racial conflict. In chapter 10, "Encouraged," Watson reviews some of the events that have contributed to the racial division in America and then goes on to explain why, despite the deep racial division evident, he remains very encouraged.



BENJAMIN WATSON is a tight end in the NFL, a writer and a speaker, and a widely read and followed commentator on social media. He attended Duke University and the University of Georgia, where he majored in finance. After an all-SEC senior campaign, he was drafted in the first round of the 2004 NFL draft by the New England Patriots. He won a Super Bowl ring in his rookie season and appeared in another Super Bowl following the 2007 season. After a three-year stint with the Cleveland Browns—including an outstanding 2010 season —Watson signed with the Saints in 2013. He signed again with the Saints in 2018. Watson serves on the executive committee of the NFL Players Association and is the founder of the nonprofit One More Foundation along with his wife, Kirsten. They have five children.



KEN PETERSEN, who wrote this book with Watson, is a veteran of book publishing, having worked for Tyndale House Publishers and Random House/Crown [WaterBrook Multnomah]. He has written numerous books and lives with his wife, Rita, in Colorado Springs.

Encouraged

I'M ENCOURAGED

*because ultimately the problem is not a
SKIN problem, it is a SIN problem.*

SIN is the reason we rebel against authority.

SIN is the reason we abuse our authority.

*SIN is why we are racist and prejudiced and
why we lie to cover for our own.*

SIN is the reason we riot, loot, and burn.

But I'M ENCOURAGED

*because God has provided a solution for sin through his son,
Jesus, and with it, a transformed heart and mind. One that's
capable of looking past the outward and seeing what's truly
important in every human being. The cure for the Michael
Brown, Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, and Eric Garner
tragedies is not education or exposure. It's the gospel.*

So, finally, I'M ENCOURAGED

because the gospel gives mankind hope.

When I wrote the Facebook post after the Ferguson grand jury decision was announced, it opened a lot of doors with my teammates. Many of

the players and coaches, black and white, told me, “That’s what I was thinking; I just didn’t know how to say it.”

Ferguson wasn’t just Ferguson. It was America. It was the symbol of so many racial conflicts over the months—each with different sets of circumstances, all of them prompting strong responses among blacks and whites.

It’s hard to follow current events closely during the NFL season. Football can be like a bottomless pit, consuming everyone involved for six months. Ferguson, though, was something none of us could get away from. I suspect this was true for most Americans—the nature of the Ferguson tragedy galvanized the attention of people who would otherwise be wrapped up in their own work and daily pursuits. It was on the news constantly, from August (when Michael Brown was killed) through November (when a grand jury decided there was not enough probable evidence to indict Officer Darren Wilson).

For us ballplayers—in my case, on the New Orleans Saints—some things are still hard to talk about, despite how close we become during training camp and the regular season. As the saying goes: If you want to keep friends, never talk about religion or politics. Or race.

But my Facebook post opened the conversation among us.

Even if we didn’t agree totally—and we often didn’t—we could at least express our views and hear from each other. I heard every kind of opinion from all sides of the spectrum. But it was encouraging that almost every response became a *dialogue*. Sometimes we had to agree to disagree, but that was after a back-and-forth discussion. Talking about these issues is the first step to understanding and healing.

One teammate asked me, “Did you write something important? My mom just told me I had to read something written by one of my teammates.”

The feedback I received from the public via Facebook, Twitter, and e-mail mirrored what I’d heard from my friends and teammates. One person, identifying himself as an atheist, commented at the end of my

post. He thanked me for my words, which he truly appreciated, “minus the part about God.”

I appreciated his response and told him so.

But there can never be a “minus the part about God” if we want real solutions.

• • •

I think it’s interesting that so many people agree that the tragedy at the Charleston AME church, where Dylann Roof shot nine people to death, was pure evil. I don’t know how we can quickly agree on the presence of evil but still question the existence of God.

I believe in God, and I don’t know how we can talk about the race problem in America without talking about God.

What is under our skin, and under the skin problem in America, is a spiritual problem. Every time we point at someone else or at an entire race—reducing them to a single story, diminishing them by stereotypes and assumptions—we overlook our own failure. When we point outside ourselves and say, “You should have done this . . .” or “You were wrong to . . .” we miss the point.

When we focus on another person’s *skin*, we miss the reality of our own *sin*.

This is not about religion or church. This is about you and me, black and white, individually acknowledging that we have done wrong. That we have judged others. That we have bias and prejudice in our own hearts.

It starts *here*.

Indeed, that very idea is found in the Bible: “Everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God’s glorious standard” (Romans 3:23, NLT). One thing I am absolutely certain of: Darren Wilson is a sinner, and so was Michael Brown. So am I. And so are you.

This race business must grieve God greatly. From his perspective, it’s not about white or black, fair or unfair, or statistics about the police

or black people. From God’s perspective, we have *all* messed up, and we’re *all* in need of him.

God gives *race* a new meaning. It’s called the *human* race.



Here’s what I’ve come to believe: At the root of racism is a flawed view of ourselves.

Racism is based on an elevation of our own talents, physical characteristics, and DNA—which we inherited by no choice or merit of our own—over someone else’s. It’s an assumption that the other person is *different* and thus we are better. It’s an attitude that says, “I represent the norm, and *you* are the variation, the outlier, the odd one.”

It’s wrong, of course—not just morally but factually. As I have written here, we all—black, white, Hispanic, Asian, Native American, and every other race—are 99.9 percent the same. We all have predominantly the same DNA. We all are human.

I recently had an appointment with a dermatologist. I sat in the examination room and checked my iPhone as I waited for the doctor to come in. After a short wait, I heard the customary knock, the door opened slowly, and in walked my new dermatologist.

I’m not sure what I expected, but the doctor turned out to be a brown-haired white woman who was a little older than I am. We exchanged background information for a few minutes. She was very knowledgeable and knew just what to do to help me.

At the end of the visit, I asked her a question about a specific hair product she had recommended. I must have known it was a borderline dumb question, so I prefaced it with, “Excuse my ignorance, but . . . with these products, does it matter if you’re black or white?”

What she said next reminded me of what I already know but constantly need to be reminded of.

“Hair is just hair,” she said. “It’s all about texture, and that depends on the melanin in your skin. Under a microscope, all skin and hair

follicles are basically the same. The only difference is the amount of melanin. Curl types and hair properties such as texture, density, elasticity, and porosity can vary across the spectrum of skin tone. So really, hair is about the individual, not the individual's race."

It's amazing that melanin—the pigment that gives human skin, hair, and eyes their color—has caused so much pain and tragedy in America.

Race is indeed a figment of our melanin. Our differences are cultural, not genetic. Across the globe, we have different marriage customs, languages, dress, and diets. Even with all these differences, our DNA is extremely similar. So when our God-given differences make us think we are somehow better than others, we must reevaluate the foolishness of our thinking.

When black neurosurgeon Dr. Ben Carson was asked why he doesn't talk about race more often, he said, "When I take someone into the operating room, I'm actually operating on the thing [the brain] that makes them who they are. The skin doesn't make them who they are."¹

Under our skin, we are the same—flesh, blood, and spirit. We are commonly human. All of us are human beings, whom God created.

• • •

The good news is that we all are human. The bad news is that all humans have the same disease. It's called sin.

Because we all descended from the first man, Adam, we inherited his sin nature from birth. People often say that kids have to learn to be bad. But as a father of five, I can tell you that they are sinful as soon as they get here. It may take some time to fully manifest, but every child is selfish, prideful, jealous, and rebellious. And the condition doesn't cure itself when we become adults. Our sin nature is alive from day one and continues to keep us in bondage, compelling us to succumb to its desires.

So when we talk about justice, we need to be mindful of the justice that *we* deserve in the eyes of God.

I think it's interesting that so many people are quick to point out other people's wrongdoing and yet are resistant to using the word *sin*. Why is that? Maybe we know that deep down, we are sinful ourselves. If we use the word *sin*, we implicate ourselves.

We point our finger at Michael Brown for stealing a cigarillo. But if we used the word *sin*, we might have to fess up about cheating on our taxes or stealing from our employers. Yes, we cheat and steal in other ways and then lie to say we haven't. We are fornicators, adulterers, and abusers. We are racists.

We are sinners.

The soil that racism grows from is sin.

At times, our plight can seem hopeless, and our efforts to change can seem futile. The beauty of the gospel (the good news about God) is that he loved us so much that he sent his Son as a sacrificial redeemer, not only to pay the penalty for our sin (through his death) but also to free us from the bondage of sin and give us everlasting life. What we need runs so much deeper than a cure for a single social ill. We need a cure for the common sin, the central obstacle that separates us from God.

It is only by the power of God that our hearts can be transformed from the inside out.

It is only by the power of God that changed hearts will produce changed behavior and a changed society.

• • •

There is something else important here that we cannot afford to overlook.

Grace.

Many people know about grace through the hymn "Amazing Grace," which is often thought to be a Negro spiritual. But it was written by a white British poet and pastor named John Newton.

Earlier in his life, in the mid-1700s, Newton was a slave trader. He transported slaves on ships from Africa to—get this—Charleston,

South Carolina. He was an atheist, convinced that if there was a God, this God wasn't making himself known to one John Newton.

On one transatlantic crossing, Newton's ship encountered a terrible storm. Everyone on board thought they were doomed. In the turmoil, Newton prayed—and God made himself known to him. The ship survived, the journey was completed, and John Newton found faith in God.

In his later life, Newton became an abolitionist, fighting against the institution of slavery. And he wrote the famous hymn that begins, "Amazing grace! how sweet the sound—that saved a wretch like me!" The hymn was later sung by slaves in America.

But my point about grace doesn't concern the hymn. It concerns the changed heart of the person who wrote it. Grace is about how God bridges the racial divide one heart and one person at a time.

Throughout this book, we've talked about this person or that person who did something wrong and became part of the national conversation surrounding a racial incident. We say this person deserves this and that person deserves that. We call for justice to be done. Yet we fail to see our own sin and the justice *we* deserve because of it.

The equation of God's justice is this: our sin = punishment and death.

So we all—black human beings and white human beings alike—must come to recognize our own sin. We must understand the just punishment we deserve. We must come to a place of personal brokenness and see our need—our desperate need—for God.

The Bible says: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9, NIV).

Here is the equation of the salvation that God offers us: our confession of sin + faith in Jesus Christ = forgiveness and deliverance.

If and when we confess, through repentance and faith we will discover grace—the grace of God that says we are forgiven.

And here's the point: Only when we personally experience God's grace—his unmerited favor—will we be able to extend grace to others. To Darren Wilson. To Michael Brown. To each other as black and white human beings.

This is the gospel. The Good News. The apostle Paul, writing in the first century, said, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28, ESV).

I am not naive enough to believe that the issue of race will be totally eradicated from our midst while we're here on planet Earth. Until Christ returns, there will always be bastions of hatred and callousness.

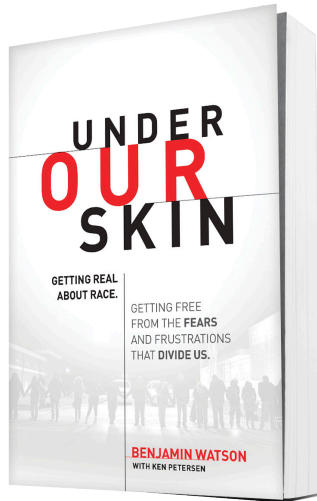
I'm encouraged, though, because the times we're living in have forced us to be honest about where we stand, priming us for God to do a tremendous work in our lives, if we'll let him. As black people and white people, we need that revival, that awakening. And it can happen through Jesus Christ.

Only through a relationship with Jesus Christ will the earthly distinctions between us fade, as our oneness in him takes precedence over color, creed, and culture and as our allegiance to him compels us to make those who matter to him matter most to us.

This is our hope.

ENDNOTES

1. "Ben Carson: Our Skin Does Not Make Us Who We Are, Our Brain Does," CNSNews.com, August 7, 2015, www.cnsnews.com/news/article/cnsnewscom-staff/ben-carson-our-skin-does-not-make-us-who-we-are-our-brain-does. Accessed September 2, 2015.



For so many people, the racial divide is an argument, a political position, a debate on TV. But keeping our distance isn't working. It's not an option anymore. This is about you and me. It's about our neighbors, our children, and our world. Change starts here. Read more about this change and get involved in making it happen.

<https://www.tyndale.com/p/under-our-skin/9781496413307>

THE GENIUS OF ONE

IN A FRACTURED AND ON-EDGE WORLD, there are some who are called to unity. Unity is not always easy or intuitive. It is simply a better way. Unity is how God still gets things done on earth, tracing back to the prayer Jesus prayed on the worst night of his life: that we would be one.

In *The Genius of One*, author and pastor Greg Holder will take you on a journey from that glorious prayer of Jesus, past the debates and divisions that isolate Christians, into the reality of a church united under God for the sake of the world. In chapter 11, “The Jesus Answer,” Holder will explain how Jesus has provided a three-part framework for constructive conversation that will help the church move toward unity.



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The Jesus Answer

Lessons Learned in Ferguson

The setting couldn't have been more peaceful as I stood on a deck overlooking a lake surrounded by rolling, wooded hills. The heat of the day had not yet overtaken the coolness of the morning. But even in the peacefulness, *peace* was not the word that came to my mind. This Saturday in July of 2016 marked the end of a long and violent week in our country. A major news website led with this headline: "Who Can Heal America?"¹

Few would contest that America needs healing. The tattered nerves of a nation have been fully exposed in recent years. The opening sentence of the article captured this acute pain:

Raw racial tensions, live-streamed killings, strained trust between the police and communities they serve, and a presidential race that has scorched deep divides have the nation on edge and wondering if a leader will emerge from the chaos.²

As I read that article, we were facing an upcoming election. But I am convinced that no matter when you're reading these words, America (and the rest of the world) will still need healing. So the question, with its implied despair, remains. Who *can* heal America? Is there anyone?

No.

That is, if we're talking about any of us.

You know where this is heading. You read the chapter title. You're smart like that. We Christians "know" what the answer is supposed to be. For us, the answer is always Jesus. And yet, we hesitate—because how does that work in the real world? The thought many of us have these days is one we won't admit out loud: *I have no idea how the "Jesus answer" applies here.*

It's true that answering the question with Jesus is obvious. But that doesn't make the answer *any less true*. Nor does it make it Christianly naive. We who live in the United States will not see our country's hurts healed because of America's collective Christian faith. If ever that was a reality, it is no longer. Law scholar John Inazu eloquently explains in his book that we Christians now live in a pluralistic society of many faiths and viewpoints.³ Now, that doesn't mean we should simply lay down our Scripture-rooted convictions. Rather, we must grapple with what it means to live out our faith in this reality. David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons's recent work *Good Faith* is a thought-provoking call to do just that. They end a chapter entitled "Who Will Lead?" with these words: "Solving these problems is up to good faith Christians, starting with how we engage our neighbors with whom we disagree."⁴

This is no doubt a significant way in which twenty-first-century Christ followers will have a lasting impact on their world: engaging neighbors with whom they disagree. It is my assertion that how we face the great issues of our day is also inextricably tied to how we Christians engage each other—*especially when we disagree.*

I believe this is where the Jesus answer comes into full view.

Or at least, it should. If only we knew where to start.

A FRAMEWORK MIGHT HELP

Many believers are perplexed and often hesitant. In the midst of this confusion are Christian leaders themselves. We pastors, priests, and

ministers are often ill-equipped to deal with our own emotions, much less to help our congregations articulate the hurt and outrage they are experiencing. Our steps are wobbly and our words unsure, and in this way we are no different from the world around us. But such uncertainty is not new.

We've long lived in a society steeped in what one expert has termed "chronic anxiety."⁵ Rabbi and family therapist Edwin Friedman tells us that this anxiety is "deeper and more embracing than community nervousness. Rather than something that resides within the psyche of each one, it is something that can envelop, if not actually connect, people."⁶

This anxiety has enveloped us. It has also connected us. For all our differences, we have this in common: We live on the razor's edge. The disquiet in our hearts keeps us hypervigilant. Our margins stay narrow, our fuses short. We do not trust those who might look, think, or vote differently from us. We are not sure what we can say—at parties, Bible studies, work, or school. We watch the news, hear a story, read a posting. We see something with our own eyes. And deep inside is the roiling, boiling sense that things are not right.

Where do we start?

Friedman's point of reference was the work of Murray Bowen, a pioneer in family therapy.⁷ In dealing with families awash with chronic anxiety, Bowen noticed similar behaviors in larger people groups—including entire societies that had been overwhelmed with anxiety. Could it be that at this time in our history, on this page of our story, our society is much like an overwrought and overmatched family? Not sure of the next move, anxiously swinging back and forth between giving up and lashing out.

Unfortunately, we Christians are no different from the world around us.

And yet we are.

It is our time to shine some light onto the path. It will not be easy or automatic. Nor will everyone join us. Not yet. As Jesus told a teacher

of Israel, some people love darkness because what they are doing is evil.⁸ And evil hates the light. But it is now time for us to lead with more confidence. Where do we start?

A framework might help.

Let's consider the Jesus answer for this question composed of three interconnected parts. Some of you will now be tempted to dismiss this as too simple. Perhaps, but simple is not a bad place to start when you're feeling overwhelmed.

I warn you: These are not new thoughts, and this is not a comprehensive plan. It's merely a starting point. Hopefully others will elaborate on this, improve upon it, correct what needs correcting, deepen its substance, and broaden its scope.

Here, then, are the three parts of the Jesus answer: A beginning, a middle, and an end (sort of).

One won't work without the other because each supports and fuels the other two. This is not a rigid formula but a framework. Keep your eye on all three. It will require everything we've learned up to now:

1. Create the space for dialogue that won't happen elsewhere.
2. Look for creative collaborations that won't happen elsewhere.
3. Endure with a tenacious hope that isn't found elsewhere.

I warned you they weren't earth shattering.

1. Create Space for Dialogue That Won't Happen Elsewhere

Many conversations taking place in the public square are no doubt having an effect, but most can only go so far before breaking down. People have run out of patience. They have also run out of words—at least the good ones. In the rubble of our own Babel, we keep shouting louder and louder in languages that the people around us no longer understand.

What we're doing is not working.

Should not the people of God have a better chance? Do we not share a common language of grace even when we *do not agree*? We are the people best equipped for difficult dialogue. It will not be easy, but the genius of us working together as one is the way out. It is a tangible expression of how Jesus is the answer. Of course, some of this is already happening in churches and organizations, but it is time for the greater Christian community to intentionally foster these different, better conversations.

Am I the expert now leading the way? Hardly.

I'm just one whom God keeps giving chances to learn from my mistake-ridden journey. And some of what I've learned came from sitting around a table.

In Ferguson, Missouri.

FELLOWSHIP HALL

In the summer and fall of 2014, it was Ferguson's turn to grab the world's attention with the shooting death of Michael Brown at the hands of a Ferguson police officer. The details surrounding this event are still shrouded with hurt, high emotion, and a lack of agreement on what actually happened. But on this much all agree: A young man's death sparked a reaction and counterreaction that reached far beyond a small suburb north of St. Louis. It became the all-consuming story of our nation. It also brought to the forefront the topic of systemic oppression and a frustration in the African American community that had remained unseen (or unnoticed) and, from their perspective, unresolved by whites. Add to that a desire for justice (a word used by all), and tension in our city was palpable.

For me, it was a bit more than a national headline. I did not grow up in Ferguson. I would never suggest that I know what it was to feel some of those emotions rushing to the surface of many in those volatile weeks and months.

But I did spend some of the formative years of my life at a church in Ferguson. Some of God’s powerful work in drawing me to become a pastor happened in a pew (a pew!) in Ferguson. I have friends who still live and worship there. So I am by no means an expert, but the community, the churches, and the people of Ferguson matter to me personally.

From August to November of that year, and now beyond, our team reached out to pastors—black and white—in that community, asking what we could do to support them and address the issues coming to light. I say “coming to light” as if these were all new developments. What I learned to my own growing conviction is how deep and festering are the hurts of many in our community.

We mostly listened and prayed in the early confusing days. Of course, there are numerous stories of many churches doing the right thing, the good and loving thing, during that time.

For us, much of what we initially learned came from intentional, difficult conversations. In the days leading up to the grand-jury announcement that Officer Wilson would not be prosecuted, and several times after that, we convened off-the-radar meetings. No media would be notified or allowed to attend. The first meeting (and subsequent others) would take place in Ferguson—at the church with those pews. Pastors, law enforcement officers, community organizers, business leaders, a prominent mayor, a chief of police, a state trooper who would oversee operations, and educators from the school districts in the area were invited. One of the pastors in Ferguson, a friend, quietly asked if some of the prominent protestors and the organizers of their movement could attend. Of course. They would be welcomed. Over a dozen others showed up as well.

With that, we all gathered in what this Baptist church calls its “fellowship hall.”

Interesting term—*fellowship hall*. Remember, in the streets each night a nervous standoff played out between protestors and law

enforcement—and here they were meeting in a church. You could feel the *fellowship* draining right out of that *hall*. Against a backdrop of hurt, anger, and fear and with absolutely no agreement over what happened one afternoon in August, our meeting began.

Around a table.

It wasn't much to look at—a series of long banquet tables forming a large, open square. But we wanted to be around a table.

Scot McKnight says, “Tables create societies.”⁹ I believe he's right. They're places of meeting. Of convening. Of relationships. He goes on to talk about the importance of an actual physical object to “create space for the invasion of grace.”¹⁰ Right again. There's something about sitting around a table that anchors us. We see one another's eyes; we hear one another's voices.

That was the plan, anyway.

It was far from perfect, that first meeting around a table. But it did yield enough results that everyone agreed to come back the next night. Such was the longing for this different kind of place where things could be said and at least heard. The cynic might say our gatherings did no good. The cynic would be wrong. In a few ways I'll share and in many ways I won't, God did something around that table that continues today.

TABLE MANNERS

It must be said that the people attending those initial meetings were not all Christians, and some admitted this outright: coming from other faiths or no faith at all. My other clue to this was what I am certain was a new record for instances of a certain word bomb in that fellowship hall. The meeting was—how shall we put this?—raw. But if grace invaded the space around *that* table—and it surely did—then we can create space *anywhere* for our brothers and sisters—with whom we share the Spirit of God—to converse *even when we vehemently disagree*. This is our chance, and it begins with this difficult first step and some things we learned from our first and subsequent talks around a table.

NOBODY COMES IF THEY AREN'T ASKED.

It sounds so obvious. But someone has to make the first awkward move. At first, some will wonder about the details—who's coming? why are they coming? where is the meeting?—and all those things matter. But hold them loosely. Offer to host unless the most loving thing to do would be to allow someone else to host. Pray when you get together, but do more than pray. Our experience has been that in the aftermath of a tragedy, there's a sudden outbreak of prayer meetings. This is such a good thing. But now it is time to talk and listen and learn. Soon we will take action.

None of that can happen unless people are invited.

DO NOT EXPECT PEOPLE TO SAY THINGS PERFECTLY.

In fact, expect the opposite. Well-meaning people, speaking from their hearts, are not always (or even usually) eloquent. Nor are they always careful. In previous chapters, we've spoken of the power of words. It all applies here. Pay particular attention if you speak from a position of power. With these conversations will come great passion. With great passion comes the occasional misstep. This will happen. What happens after that often determines how things will go.

Friedman lists certain characteristics of chronically anxious families that might apply here. One is an "intense reactivity."¹¹ There are no small or slow reactions. Everyone is quick to interpret one another and in the least flattering ways. When this happens in a dialogue—everything shuts down.

But there is another way.

I remember watching an African American pastor smile gently and patiently when someone was less than respectful to one of his suggestions. He did not like or agree with what had just been said. However, it did not end the conversation, for there were bold words he would still speak. But first he created margin in the room for such verbal misfires. Proverbs 19:11 tells us that "it is to one's glory to overlook an

offense” (NIV). That’s what I witnessed more than once. This pastor did not ignore the greater issues. In fact, it was because of those issues that he would not allow a slighter offense to pull him off focus.

MUCH OF YOUR ENERGY WILL BE SPENT ON LISTENING.

It’s hard to hear things from a different perspective. But remember how taxing it is for the other person to explain (again) life through his or her eyes. The first reaction to hearing another’s perspective—especially when part of the problem comes your way—will be what Friedman calls a displacement of blame.¹² You’re convinced that this can’t be what you or “your side” did wrong. While someone is speaking, you start immediately building an argument against that notion. Unfortunately, you are no longer listening—you are defending or deflecting or debunking or maybe some other word that starts with a *d*—but you are not listening.

But you must if there’s any chance of moving forward.

I witnessed that highly visible chief of police listen to an angry protestor about something very specific that was happening on the streets. He wrote down the details. Wincing at least once but heard every word. His answer was simple and straightforward: “You’re right. That was wrong. I’ll make sure it doesn’t happen again.” It didn’t solve everything. But he listened. He admitted someone else was right and vowed to take action. Pile up enough of those moments and you might have something.

YOU’RE ALREADY CONTAGIOUS. USE IT TO YOUR ADVANTAGE.

Eye rolls, half-muttered put-downs, and sarcastic laughter travel faster than the plague around a table. Such is the result of being close. Now use it to your advantage. “A harsh word stirs up anger,” we read in Proverbs 15, but don’t forget the front half of the verse: “A gentle answer turns away wrath.”¹³ I saw the gentle voice of a young protester and the kind tone of a pastor turn the volume down at different times. As you pray constantly in those moments, may it be your nonanxious, grace-filled response that is contagious.

SPEAK TRUTH TO YOUR “HERD.”

Friedman warns us about what he calls “herding.” In a herd, no one is really allowed to have their own opinion, and problems are usually lumped into all-or-nothing categories. It becomes increasingly difficult to “even see things differently from the rest of the ‘herd.’”¹⁴

There will come moments when we must break from whatever herd we think we belong to and speak truth because it is truth. Christians—on all sides of a debate—need to say some things out loud that others in their herd will not say. Far too many people I know are afraid of losing a debate. So they remain silent when they are the ones who could speak powerfully.

We the people of God will not agree on all matters or on how to best address every matter. Particularly when the hurts run so deep and the wounds are continually reopened. But for us to have different conversations than the rest of the world, we must stand against evil as it is exposed and admit the truth whenever it shows up. Even when it doesn’t align with our original position, gut feeling, or political persuasion.

One writer put it like this: “Be humble enough to highlight truth and virtue on the other side—and to criticize wrongdoing on your own side.”¹⁵ (I don’t like using the language of “sides,” but such is our fractured world.) Truth is spoken across the table and to our “side.” It is never aimed like a heat-seeking missile. But such moments of humility and courage slowly build trust around the table.

So too does a very simple act.

DISTANCE DEMONIZES

Many leaders I reached out to helped shape and inform our actions in those days of 2014 and beyond. Among them was a dear friend, a pastor in Baltimore, David Anderson. David sometimes speaks at our church, and I have spoken at his. As we watched the events unfold, we talked openly. We shared our hearts. I asked him bluntly to help me understand the perspective of an African American male

in twenty-first-century America because I am—I believe the technical term is—*white*.

We talked, we prayed, we kidded each other, and we wept and dreamed of how God alone could heal these hurts that run so deep. I also asked David—an expert in racial reconciliation—to co-lead those initial meetings in Ferguson. We could write an entire book about our experiences in those hours. But for the sake of privacy (and my editor), let me tell you the biggest lesson I learned from our time around the table. It will be good to remember this truth as we move from the beginning to the middle of the Jesus answer.

Distance demonizes.

David told all of us an African proverb to illustrate this point. It is found at the end of his very helpful book *Gracism*:

When I saw him from afar, I thought he was a monster.

When he got closer, I thought he was just an animal.

When he got closer, I recognized that he was a human.

When we were face to face, I realized that he was my brother.¹⁶

Distance demonizes. From a distance it's easier to treat you as a threat, an enemy, a monster. But when the gap is closed, I see a person—with your own story. Your own family. Your own concerns. You are “you” and not an “it.”

In that first meeting, some protestors recognized one of the lead officers who was on the streets most nights. He recognized them as well. Even if the memories were vague, a photograph had captured at least one encounter. The photo had been picked up by some of the news services. It showed a young woman screaming into the face of a steely-eyed police officer. It spoke volumes.

You can see the desperate outrage. Her job that night? To protest.

You can also see the firm resolve. His job that night? To protect.

Both were doing exactly what they thought needed to be done.

You can argue that there was a better way for each of them to go about their business, but on this night they sat at the same table. Soon a sheepish awareness that the other was in the room gave way to genuine dialogue. First about police practices. About what it feels like as an African American to be stopped on the way to work for some vague traffic violation. She told him how the whole system feels rigged against her. She tried to describe a fear and powerlessness he'd just have to believe because he'd never understand it. There was anger about some of the initial tactics used by the police. Nervous laughter peppered the room at times. It is quite a thing to speak directly to power. He mostly listened and occasionally nodded in agreement.

When it was his turn, the officer spoke of his own feelings when a cop anywhere does something criminal and how that cannot be defended or ignored. If it's wrong, then it's wrong. Period. But then he told the room what it feels like when someone screams profane things about him or threatens his family. She mostly listened and occasionally nodded in agreement.

Both admitted in front of all the others things they could do differently. And at least they both caught a glimpse into the other's life. The meeting continued, but at the end, another photo was taken (her idea). This time side by side. Smiling. No screaming. No riot gear. Just people. Not monsters. People.¹⁷

Was this the magic answer that made it all better? Of course not. But for some people, something changed. This officer and other protest leaders shared phone numbers *so they could text one another in the midst of the protest* in case things deteriorated. They were actually working together for people's safety. Did they still disagree about some things? Yes. Did they find some things on which they could agree? A few. There was (and still is) a humanizing effect that happened around that table. It can stretch further into the future if encouraged and revisited. Not because they agree on everything or even most things. But because a distance was bridged.

If these people can do this in the heat of a tense moment, what is stopping the rest of us?

2. Look for Creative Collaborations That Couldn't Happen Elsewhere

In the middle of the Jesus answer we risk trying something together.

To keep us from merely reacting, we must all feel a sense of progress. And progress means addressing the core reasons and issues for unrest. In an anxious society, Friedman warns of the danger of wanting a quick fix. “Can someone please make this conflict go away?” This can lead to a constant state of dealing with only the latest moment but never fully addressing the real issue. If a room is filling with gas fumes, we of course need to make sure no one strikes a match. But at what point do we open the windows, disperse the fumes, and find the gas leak?¹⁸

In this stage, we should make a sustained effort to focus on specific issues at the root of these uneasy times. This will take time. In the wake of the Ferguson conversations, we continue to experience haunting remnants and fresh reminders of our nation’s struggle with race. Many do not want to hear of this. You may want to move on. So does everyone else. But this complex and checkered narrative deserves a meaningful response. People deserve such a response.

Interestingly, the most powerful conversations have often occurred once we leave the table and take action. The distance continues to close in the side-by-side work. This is where God can heal both blindness and old wounds—one awkward step at a time. But it is in this middle stage that we *do* something. This is why you are standing side by side. Commitments made to one another and a community must now become a tangible investment of money and human capital. As David Anderson notes, “Words matter, but actions make them matter more.”¹⁹

Some of the actions taken need to be with new, unorthodox partnerships in which new ideas are hatched. In the incubator of some of our meetings and relationships of step one, we now consider things not

imagined before. All sparked by the Spirit responding to our working as one. These are not clearly marked paths. You will need to improvise along the way. John Paul Lederach tells us, “If we are to invoke the moral imagination, we must incite and excite the artist within us.”²⁰ Some will say we are crazy for trying such things, but we must try them together. We must adjust and learn along the way. But finally we will be taking action beyond another meeting. We still need to keep talking around that table, but finally we will be doing something!

Now we must do something for a long time.

It is in the aftermath of a tragedy, when media trucks have moved on to the next headline, that steps—often small and unimpressive—will lead to lasting change. Over time, the faithfulness of Christians partnering across city and church lines will win the battle.

In the future, you and your surprising partnerships will write this story. And by the way, as you do this, work with motivated partners and people who know how to dream as big as you do. Go where God leads you. But do something together for a long time. For us in Ferguson, this has led to specific efforts in three areas: (1) partnering with school districts around issues of literacy, (2) providing resources to young pastors as they become Kingdom entrepreneurs, and (3) mentoring law enforcement officers. Along the way, God has even shown us how these efforts can intersect.

But we must stay the course. For a long time. For us, we speak of investing for *a generation or two*. That’s the long view, and we Christians can see that far.

And then when people tell us we’re crazy for believing God can still heal, we will tell them about the *really long view*.

3. Endure with a Tenacious Hope That Cannot Be Found Elsewhere

“Let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up doing good.”²¹

People across the conservative-liberal spectrum can agree: Racism is sin. So too is the violence against innocents—no matter their color.

That means we are in a battle between good and evil.

God is calling us to face it all with humble, even broken hearts, but never hopeless ones. Come to the table, to many tables—for meetings, for dinner, for Communion as we celebrate the grace of our Lord, all the while knowing we will gather one day around another table for the supper to end all suppers described in Revelation 19.

And at that table, in that day, there will be no more hurt. No more hatred. No more fear or anger or darkness. No more tears. There will be no more wondering how we are going to coexist.

For we will be home. And we will be healed.

This is how the story ends.

This is our hope.

Until then, we have been called to do things differently: “Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it.”²² Peace. This is what we long for. This is what we are to pursue. Not merely the absence of conflict, but *shalom*. We have been taught so well by so many that we know by now that *shalom* is even more than our word *peace*. It is a satisfying wholeness we can barely imagine. This is how things were at the beginning and how they will be again.

May God help us as we pursue this peace. But may he also give us the courage to confess to one another. I walk on tender ground that some would say is not mine to cover, but may God lead us to forgive. It will cost us, this forgiveness, it always does. Tim Keller gives us that beautiful, honest warning.²³ But this too is part of the Jesus answer. So together we pursue this *shalom*. This peace. This put-back-togetherness.

In the hard work of the beginning and the middle, we remind one another of the end. We are not crazy for believing that God can really heal this hurt. We are not crazy for believing that some of that healing can happen now. One of the ways we will remind one another of this truth is by telling stories—old and new. In his work around the world

as a peacemaker, Lederach has learned the power of such stories. From a Tajik warlord, no less, comes this helpful reminder: “You have to circle into the truth through stories.”²⁴

So one last story.

AN INSTRUMENT OF PEACE

After long and productive conversations that are leading to action with civic and business leaders and educators, there was another gathering. Around a table.

Without going into great detail, this conversation was between an African American worship leader and a young white officer. Many heartfelt interactions had already taken place around this table: I heard words such as “That should never happen” and “I can’t imagine” and then these: “I’m sorry.”

No one on either side of that table could fully understand the other side, but the distance was being bridged. It was safe enough now for this young officer to share from an even deeper place—to say that he thought his work was what he was called to do, but it wasn’t what he expected, this calling. And then he spoke of the burden that comes from seeing death. A particular accident came to his mind. Tough guy. Honest guy. And here, among his peers, the slightest emotion pooled in his eyes.

That’s when Nikki, the young woman, leaned forward to bestow favor on this young man. She reminded him how important his calling is. She thanked him for his courage and integrity. She shared some of what is her burden to carry in this world and then this: “I am so sorry for the weight on your shoulders. I am sorry for what has been said and done to you that is wrong.” She had done nothing to this officer, and he knew it. He looked at her and said the same: “I am so sorry for what has happened to you that you never deserved.”

And then she sang a well-known prayer: “Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.” There it was. Floating over and then filling the

room. Peace. This is what I couldn't find that morning on the deck overlooking the lake. Peace. But this is what we pursue together—we broken, grace-soaked people who will not give up. This is our hope. That God can do this. When the plan is working and we are making progress. When it isn't and we try again. When someone says something and our hearts fill with anger. When we see something live-streamed that knocks us to our knees. We will pursue peace.

On that same deck at the end of that same horrid summer week, I was privileged to be part of a conference call in which I mostly listened to leaders from across America. There was much wisdom shared—some of which has informed these pages. But at the end, Dr. Gerald Durley was asked to close with his comments and prayer. He spoke of the early days with Dr. King. He reminded us that this was not a new struggle. He told us to not lose hope. He proclaimed the sovereignty of God, and then he said these words: “These things that seem over our heads are still under his care.”

God is not overwhelmed by the struggles of our world. He is heart-broken by it all. But he is not anxious or fearful or perplexed. He is our good and gracious God, and he is calling his children to step into the fray as never before.

Call me a fool. Call me naive. Call me unqualified to speak on such matters. You might be right. But of this I am sure: The Jesus answer is the answer.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

What tensions currently divide your community?

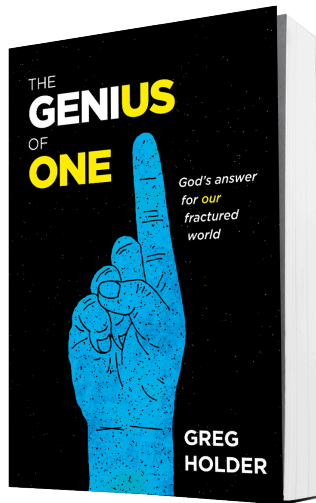
What would it look like for you to “bridge the gap” and promote reconciliation?

How is Jesus calling you to be an agent of peace?

What messy but necessary conversations do you need to have?

ENDNOTES

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If you are clinging to the hope that God is still at work, this book will stir a deeper longing for unity and provide practical steps toward that path.

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WHILE THE WORLD WATCHED

CAROLYN MAULL MCKINSTRY'S STORY is a poignant and gripping eyewitness account of what it was like to grow up in the Jim Crow South—from the bombings, riots, and assassinations to the historic marches and triumphs that characterized the civil rights era. In chapter 23 of *While the World Watched*, Carolyn recounts her feelings and struggles from being called as a witness in the 2002 trial of Bobby Frank Cherry, one of the men who set the bomb that killed her four young friends.



CAROLYN MAULL MCKINSTRY was only fifteen years old and only a few feet away when the Klan-planted bomb that killed four of her friends exploded in the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. It was one of the seminal moments in the civil rights movement, a sad day in American history . . . and the turning point in her young life.



DENISE GEORGE has authored over 30 books and 1500 articles, teaches book writing seminars, is a public speaker, and is the founder of The Book Writing Boot Camp.

CHAPTER 23

The Cherry Trial

[Bobby Frank Cherry was a] trucker with an eighth grade education, no upper front teeth, a “Bobby” tattoo on his arm, seven [sic] kids, and a wife he beat and cheated on.

DIANE MCWHORTER¹

*He who is devoid of the power to forgive
is devoid of the power to love.*

MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

Leading up to the trial, I paced around the house for days. I developed panic attacks, and my heart raced for no explainable reason. I couldn't concentrate. Nothing brought me comfort.

I had no idea what to expect when I appeared in court.

A few days before the trial, the telephone rang. I picked up the receiver and heard the voice of Rodger Dale Bass Jr., Bobby Cherry's attorney. He was calling to make sure I would be present at the trial.

“Yes,” I said. “I told you I'd be there. . . . Yes, nine o'clock on the morning of May 6.”

I hung up the phone and threw up my hands in disbelief. Who would have thought that, almost forty years later, I'd still be dealing with the fallout from that September day?

Even now, I don't understand why I was called to testify on Cherry's

behalf. The only thing I can think of is that this was one more way to add insult to injury.



On the morning of May 6, 2002, Jerome and I drove to the courthouse. I had been sick all night. I put my hand over my heart.

“I am not sure I can do this, Jerome!” I said. Within moments, I would be face-to-face with one of the men who had murdered my friends.

Be with me, Jesus, I prayed.

You can do it, Carolyn. I'll be with you, Jesus assured me.

Jerome parked the car. When he opened my door, reporters and photographers descended on me like locusts. They stuck microphones in my face and shouted out questions. They surrounded Jerome and me, clicking their cameras, blocking our way. It felt like a nightmare.

In the chaos, Jerome quickly took off his suit jacket and covered my head with it. Then he put his arms around me and gently led me into the court building. My heart was beating so intensely that I expected it to pop out of my chest. I prayed I could answer the attorney's questions without becoming angry and without crying. I had seen only one faded newspaper photo of Bobby Frank Cherry many years before. Even then, the sight of him had sent chills down my spine.

What will it be like to see Cherry now? I wondered. How can I sit in the same room with him?

I also wondered what questions I'd have to answer. What could I possibly have to say in this man's defense? *No matter what they ask me,* I told myself, *I will say as little as possible.* Doug had promised he wouldn't cross-examine me. “Carolyn, just answer the questions as simply and succinctly as you can,” he had instructed me.

When we stepped inside the building, guards directed me to a holding room. “Mrs. McKinstry, you can't go into the courtroom until you are called to testify.”

“Can my husband come into the holding room with me?” I asked.

“No. But Mr. McKinstry can go into the courtroom.”

Jerome hugged me and reassured me and then walked into the courtroom. Guards escorted me to a small room filled with Bobby Cherry’s family members, neighbors, and friends.

Everyone looked at me—the only black person—when I entered the room. I wondered if they, too, hated black people. I wasn’t angry with Cherry or his family, but I resented the situation. Out of consideration for me and what I’d been through, I felt I should have been placed in a separate room.

“If you don’t know anything about Harley Davidsons,” one of the men said, “then you’re probably not going to fit in here very well.” He then introduced himself as Bobby Cherry’s pastor.

I glanced at the man out of the corner of my eye. He wore a worn leather jacket and black boots that came clear up to his knees. He had pulled his stringy, greasy hair into a long ponytail that hung down the nape of his neck.

“I am quite familiar with motorcycles. My son has a Honda 150,” I told him.

Then a young man no older than twenty, dressed in a military uniform, looked my way and said a soft hello. I returned his greeting. Later I found out the young man was Cherry’s grandson.

We all sat together in the small room, trying to avoid one another’s eyes. No one said another word. Every now and then the bailiff walked into the dead-quiet room and called a name. “It’s your turn to take the witness stand,” he would say.

I tried hard to remain composed as we sat in stony silence while I waited for the bailiff to call my name.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.

“Mrs. Carolyn Maull McKinstry,” the bailiff finally called. “It’s your turn to take the witness stand.”

He makes me lie down in green pastures.

I followed the bailiff into the courtroom and took the oath.

He leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul.

I swore to tell the truth, the whole truth.

He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

I sat down in the witness chair beside the judge.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death . . .

Bobby Frank Cherry sat directly in front of me, only ten feet away.

I will fear no evil, for you are with me.

I felt like a knife had cut deep into the old painful wound, sliced open the healed scar, and caused it to bleed freely once again.

Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

I looked at Bobby Frank Cherry's face.

Cherry fixed his steel-cold eyes on mine, and like a snake, his eyes never blinked, never moved. His expression—blank and hard—never changed as I answered the attorney's questions.

"Mrs. McKinstry," Mr. Bass asked. "Where were you on Sunday, September 15, 1963?"

I answered his questions as directly and honestly as I could. The questions were fairly straightforward: "What did you see that morning at church? Where were you standing when the explosion occurred?"

I looked away from Cherry's emotionless face as much as I could. But every time I glanced back his way, Bobby Frank Cherry's eyes were locked on mine. In those eyes, I sensed all the hate and bitterness directed toward me.

You're trying to intimidate me, Mr. Cherry. And you're succeeding. I still couldn't figure out why the defense had called me to testify. Was this some sort of cruel joke?

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.

As I sat in that chair in front of the judge, the attorney, and the defendant and answered question after question, I saw in my mind's eye the faces of my four dead friends. Then I focused my eyes on the face of their murderer. As Cherry stared point-blank at me, the events of Sunday, September 15, 1963, assaulted me all over again.

The thunderous boom.

The window glass shattering and falling to the floor.

The eerie silence shrouding the church.

The command to “hit the floor!”

The church members screaming, “My children! My children!”

My two brothers, nowhere to be found.

The police cars surrounding the church.

The evening news showing stretchers covered in white sheets, carrying the burned, mutilated bodies of my four friends to the morgue.

Like a flash flood, it came rushing back, threatening to overwhelm me. I again heard my mother’s words: “There were four little girls in the restroom who never made it out. They’re all dead.”

I yearned to leave the witness chair, to break away from Cherry’s fixed glare.

I spoke only the truth as I remembered it. Not a word I said helped Cherry. Before I stepped down and ended my testimony, a new fear took hold of my heart. I was older and more experienced than I’d been in 1963. I knew how violent Klan members could be. I knew what they were capable of doing to black people—even in the twenty-first century. What would happen to me?

Cherry’s eyes never stopped shouting out silent death threats. They held me in a hypnotic vice that felt as if it were about to crush me.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

“Thank you, Mrs. McKinstry,” the judge said. “You can step down now.”

Before I left, I looked again at Cherry’s face. I tried hard to find some type of goodness about him. I searched deep for some sign of sympathy or sadness or remorse for the lives he had cut short, for the pain he had caused so many people. But I found nothing in that face but evil.

Jerome later told me that during the trial Cherry’s ex-wife and

granddaughter testified against him. They said he had boasted about the bombing.

“He said he lit the fuse,” Cherry’s ex-wife told the jury.

Prosecutors showed a videotape of a mob of white men beating Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth. The *Washington Post* later described the scene in the courtroom: “Prosecutors froze the film as a slender white man with a bulbous nose, wavy hair and a cigarette dangling from his mouth—unmistakably a young Bobby Frank Cherry—was seen slamming his fist into the minister’s head after pulling what appeared to be a set of brass knuckles from his back pocket.”²

A jury of nine whites and three blacks convicted Mr. Cherry of four counts of murder and sentenced him to life in prison. After the verdict, circuit judge James Garrett asked Cherry if he had anything to say.

“This whole bunch lied all the way through this thing,” Cherry said. “Now, I don’t know why I’m going to jail for nothing. I didn’t do anything.”³

On November 18, 2004, Bobby Frank Cherry, seventy-four, died in prison from cancer.

. . .

A few days after Cherry’s trial ended, my friend Mrs. Alpha Robertson—Carole’s brokenhearted mother—quietly passed away. She finally found freedom after four decades of unbearable grief. I guess Mrs. Robertson just couldn’t leave this earth until she knew Carole’s killers had been caught and punished.

During Bobby Frank Cherry’s trial, I had to relive those past violent and tragic days in Birmingham’s history. Some might say I would have been completely justified to feel hatred, unforgiveness, and bitterness against the white people who had killed my friends and against all those who closed the doors of opportunity for generations of African Americans.

But I discovered early in life—from my grandparents, my pastor,

and others—that in God’s eyes, no life should be lived in hatred or unforgiveness. Bitterness hurts only the people whose hearts house it, not the offenders.

By God’s grace, I chose to forgive Bobby Frank Cherry, Robert Chambliss, Thomas Blanton, Herman Cash (a suspect who had died during the time the investigation was reopened), and all the others who lived lives of hate. It’s the difficult road, yet it’s also the road to ultimate freedom.



At the end of May 2002, my retirement from BellSouth became effective. I was ready—the joy of working there was now gone, and I sensed that God had something else in store for me. As I packed up my desk and said good-bye to friends, a chapter of my life closed that day. But almost immediately, a new one opened.

During the late 1970s and the 1980s, Birmingham’s black mayor, Richard Arrington, had conceived the idea of building a Civil Rights museum as a place to display and store historical documents, photographs, correspondence, reports, and other memorabilia that recounted the dark and difficult Civil Rights struggle in the South, particularly in Birmingham. He shared his dream with a group of black and white Birmingham citizens, who eagerly offered their support. Their desire was to take the lessons the city had learned during the violent struggle for Civil Rights and create a place that would “encourage communication and reconciliation of human rights issues worldwide, and . . . serve as a depository for Civil Rights archives and documents.” Led by Charles McCrary, the president and CEO of Alabama Power, Birmingham citizens raised \$6.3 million. With support from the city, as well as Birmingham’s black and white businesses, the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute* opened its doors to the public in 1992.⁴

* Since its opening in 1992, the Civil Rights Institute has had more than 1,700,000 people from all over the world pass through its doors. It is estimated that 95 percent of them come to Birmingham specifically to tour the Institute.

I served on the board of directors of the Civil Rights Institute, and along with other volunteers, I frequently led tours through the Institute and the church and spoke to groups about the history of Birmingham and the struggle for Civil Rights. During that time God gave me a renewed vision for the church—both the physical building and his people. As a community, we have a charge to care for the building, because this is where we come to do the Lord's work. We have inherited this structure and the history it contains, and we need to take care of it. But at the same time, *we* are the true church, not the building. God's love resides inside *us*, so whenever we go out into the world, we take the church with us. God showed me that yes, I need to be part of the physical church, but I also need to take his love outside the church walls.



After the bomb exploded on September 15, 1963, shaking the church's foundation and shattering its windows, people gave funds to repair Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. But many years had passed since then, and the church was once again in desperate need of repair. The old roof leaked. The wood had rotted around the windows, allowing rain to pour inside. The sanctuary carpets remained damp most of the time. The foundation had shifted, leaving deep crevices in the walls. In a word, the church was a mess.

One day, as I led a group of tourists through the church, I noticed a healthy crop of mushrooms growing out of the once-beautiful red carpet near the pulpit. That was the final straw—I knew something had to be done.

I also knew the problem wouldn't be easily solved. Church membership had dropped drastically in recent years, and there was no money for repairs. While I pondered the problem and tried to figure out a solution, I came across a letter in the church's archives. Written by Pastor C. L. Fisher to a new member, the letter was dated August 3, 1926.

My dear Friend:

You have come into the fellowship of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. I am very glad to have you here with us. Your presence means much to the Church, and the Church means much to you.

The church building and equipment and even the spirit of the whole program are inherited possessions of ours. This is our church, but it cost something. The spirit of love cost Jesus his life. This is the spirit which keeps the Church alive, and assures its triumph.

I paused from reading and looked at the church's cracked walls and wet carpet. *What will it cost us, I wondered, to repair this church and keep it going?*

Jesus paid it all, that the atmosphere of higher things might be breathed by every living man. Buildings and equipment cost the men and women of the past and present no little effort. The Ministers and people of the past are glad to hand to us this "Our Sixteenth Street." They were mindful of us.

I thought about all the people who had sacrificed time, money, and energy to build the grand old church and to furnish it with everything they needed to worship God as a community.

We must be mindful of the present and coming generations. To do this in the right way, we must make a full and rounded effort to offer to God and the future, a better Sixteenth Street.

The pastor then made a written appeal to his new member:

You are urged to help in this. The way is simple: Consecrate your life to God. Attend the services of your Church, especially the prayer services. Be loyal to your God; your Church, and its program.

Be liberal in your giving, realizing that the future generation must inherit great things, that they might know how close we lived to God. Don't forget to pray for your Church's success, and for the blessings of God to be ever upon your Minister.

*Yours in His Name,
C. L. Fisher*

“Dear Lord!” I said when I finished reading. It was as if Pastor Fisher had written this letter specifically to me! Surely what had been true for Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in 1926 was still true in 2002!

God spoke clearly to me through the pastor's yellowed letter.

“Lord,” I prayed, “through Pastor Fisher's appeal, are you showing me the more important work you want me to do for you, for your people, and for your Kingdom?”

Yes, child, he spoke to my heart.

I put the letter down. “But, Lord,” I asked, “how can we repair the church and make it better for future generations if we have no money?”

You can raise the money, Carolyn, God said to my spirit.

Me? Raise the money? “It will take millions of dollars to repair this church, Lord! I have no idea how to raise that kind of money!”

God sent to me, and to our church, a huge blessing in the form of Dr. Neal Berte, a retired president of Birmingham-Southern College. I expressed to him my vision for the church and the needs I saw, and he helped me start a campaign in Birmingham to raise the money. He encouraged me and taught me how to approach people around our city and state and ask for their help. In my view, this wasn't just a reconstruction campaign; it was part of the bigger vision for reconciliation in our city. I felt that God was calling me to be part of this effort to bring people together, to demonstrate a tangible expression of inter-racial progress.

It seemed that everyone I talked with wanted to donate money to the cause—individuals, corporations, and foundations. In a relatively

short time, they contributed almost \$4 million! In my eyes, one of the biggest blessings was that the campaign crossed all socioeconomic, religious, political, racial, gender, and age boundaries. Many donors had never had the opportunity to make a public statement for Civil Rights. They considered this fund-raising campaign an opportunity to do so.

With \$4 million in the Sixteenth Street Foundation Inc. treasury, I told Jerome, “Now there will always be resources to maintain Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, to keep it alive, to keep telling the story.”

The foundation hired architects and construction crews to complete the extensive renovations. In the midst of the repairs, the architect posted a sign at the church—a statement that perhaps said it all: “A restoration of hope!” Dr. Berte later told the *Birmingham News*, “We weren’t sure we could get the money. I think it’s a tremendous testimony to Birmingham—it speaks volumes about how far our city has come.”⁵

When I stepped back and looked at the newly restored church, it truly felt like a piece of God’s work of redemption. The place that had once been the site of lives lost was once again a place of new life. The place that had been a marker of hatred and despair was now a symbol of hope and reconciliation. The history and legacy of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church would be forever visible—a tall, stately sign of struggle, sacrifice, and triumph.

But our work was not finished. Now that the outer structure was once again secure, Dr. Berte and I wondered whether the church, with its rich history and its role in the Civil Rights movement, should be listed as a national historic landmark. That would qualify it to receive federal funds so it would remain strong, stable, and safe for future generations. Through the untiring efforts of Marjorie White, president of the Birmingham Historical Society, the church earned the national historic landmark status. It fell to me to fly to Washington, D.C., to address the United States Department of the Interior Committee on National Historic Landmarks. I told them the church’s story and why we thought the church should be considered for this national status.

I recounted the details of the church bombing, recalling that September morning somberly.

The committee listened. And they agreed. In 2006, Sixteenth Street Baptist Church became a national historic landmark. The United States attorney general, Alberto Gonzales, brought the landmark paperwork and plaque to the church himself.



Every day, 365 days a year, people come from all over the world to visit Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. They want to see the place and touch the building where courageous people died in the struggle for freedom. The church remains a symbol of hope for all who enter its doors. The church does have a history marred by pain and loss, but it has also inherited a legacy of hope, love, and reconciliation.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, “I like to believe that the negative extremes of Birmingham’s past will resolve into the positive and utopian extreme of her future; that the sins of a dark yesterday will be redeemed in the achievements of a bright tomorrow.”⁶

God is capable of redeeming even the ugliest and darkest moments from our past. But sometimes we first have to be willing to go back and face some of those painful places again. For example, if I’d had my way, I would never have set foot in Princeton Hospital again. But in the roundabout way in which God often works, I did find myself back there . . . some forty years after Mama Lessie’s death and thirty years after Granddaddy had died there.

In the early years of the twenty-first century, I was getting my seminary degree at Birmingham’s Beeson Divinity School on the campus of Samford University—something I wouldn’t have been able to do just a generation ago. During the course of my master of divinity classes, I journeyed back to Princeton Hospital for an internship. It was something my soul insisted I do. I had “unfinished business” there, and I needed to deal with it head-on. This time, however, I visited not as the

little girl in the corner of the basement when Mama Lessie had died but as a hospital chaplain.

The hospital had long been desegregated by this point. In my rounds as a part-time chaplain, I often thought back to those sad, frightening days when Mama Lessie lay dying in the unfinished basement. Now, as one of God's servants, I could provide spiritual and tangible comfort to those who needed it, without regard to color or religion. I could offer love and support during their times of illness and bereavement because I knew what it was like to be there. In his divine knack for bringing things full circle, God called me to do for others what had not been done for my grandmother.



The deaths of my four girlfriends left me with a pain I cannot describe. But something beautiful has come of it, and that's the vision God has given for reconciliation. My passion is to see people learn to work together and appreciate the diversity God created among us. This has become a calling for me, and I think about it all the time. I have been given opportunities to answer this call in my own city in smaller, daily ways. But I also receive national and international invitations to share that same passion for reconciliation in our world.

In the 1960s, it seemed as though reconciliation was primarily about blacks and whites. But today it's even broader, and it really comes down to interactions between individuals. The core of the issue is still the same, however. I believe that if we can't learn to live with our brothers and sisters here on earth, how will we get a chance to work it out in heaven? I also believe that one good deed begets another good deed and that if we all adopt a spirit of love toward our neighbors and toward each individual we encounter, we can slowly make this world a better place—a place of reconciliation, as God intended.

It has been more than forty years since my friends were killed, and we've made some progress in that time. But I have a greater vision for

the next forty years—a vision of building a society where the lamb can truly lie with the lion and there will be peace.

I'm reminded of one of the classic hymns we used to sing at Sixteenth Street Baptist Church: "It Is Well with My Soul."

*When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, Thou has taught me to say,
It is well, it is well, with my soul. . . .*

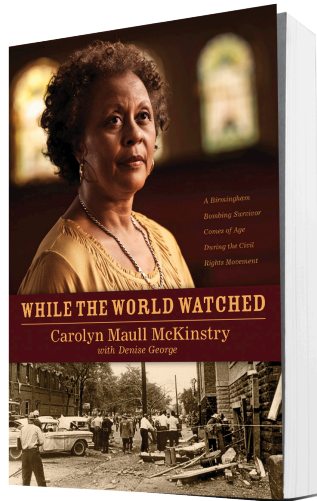
*And Lord, haste the day when my faith shall be sight,
The clouds be rolled back as a scroll;
The trump shall resound, and the Lord shall descend,
Even so, it is well with my soul.*

At this point in my life, I am able to imagine Addie, Cynthia, Denise, and Carole perched on a cloud somewhere in the sky, their arms around each other, looking down at the church. And it is clear to them that all is well. They are waving their hands and saying, "Carry on! Carry on! It is well with our souls."

And it is also well with my own soul.

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A unique and moving exploration of how racial tensions have evolved over the past five decades, *While the World Watched* is an incredible testament to how far we've come—and how far we have yet to go. You can read the rest of the “coming of age” story of this Birmingham bombing survivor in the remaining chapters of her book.

<https://www.tyndale.com/p/while-the-world-watched/9781414336374>

MEALS FROM MARS

IN *MEALS FROM MARS*, Ben Sciacca gives us a compelling and honest story of racial tension and the challenging gospel of reconciliation. It is hard to talk about race and reconciliation. It helps to have a story we can all wrap our heads around. *Meals from Mars* is just that kind of story, a parable of prejudice and providence. One of the issues that comes up in conversations about racial tension is fear. In chapter 12 of this parable, Ben Sciacca's characters speak about it. The chapter is titled "The Fear."



BEN SCIACCA is executive director of Restoration Academy, a K-12 Christian school in Birmingham, Alabama. He is the author (writing as Judah Ben) of *Kai'Ro: The Journey of an Urban Pilgrim*.

The Fear

10:45 P.M., MONDAY BEFORE THANKSGIVING

The conversation reached an awkward lull. The crackling fire and the groan of the cabin under the lashing winds were the only noises. For the time being they were warm enough. But they were still stuck together, each with his own thoughts.

Jim thought back to when he had been trapped in an elevator. He was barely thirteen years old. He could hear voices above him and knew that it was just a matter of time before someone heard the alarm and his yelling and came to help him. This was different. No one was around—even if they were, if he stepped outside, the raging wind would throw his voice back down his throat the moment he opened his mouth. His phone was gone; Malik's was dead. Compared to this, Jim would relish being stuck in an elevator again.

Malik didn't mind the silence. In his tiny house with three younger siblings and the blaring television, silence was a rare and wonderful gift. Many nights he was woken by blaring sirens roaring down the streets or by shouting in a neighboring apartment. Other times it was the *pop-pop-pop* of gunfire somewhere down the block. Rare moments of silence afforded him an opportunity to read and to think.

He hadn't intended to get so loud and defensive with Jim earlier. Ordinarily he was more respectful around adults, and he almost always felt a particular kind of awkwardness around affluent white people like Jim. His own brashness had surprised him. But his discovery of Jim's

mission of charity in his community roused some monstrous emotions in him. The strong words of his Uncle Keith came to his mind.

A fool will argue over almost anything, Malik. Don't be a fool. But a good man will never run from a good argument. Not from anyone or for any reason. With that stuff between your two ears, the Lord gave you good sense to fight and win a good argument. He also gave you those two fists you have to fight a good fight—but only if the stuff between your ears isn't enough.

Largely because of his uncle's influence, Malik had thrown himself into a variety of good arguments. And as far he knew, he'd won them all. For other reasons he had thrown himself into his own fair share of good fistfights as well.

When Malik was younger, he spent three straight summers living with Uncle Keith. As a budding teenager, he found those summers to be as formative and invigorating as any time in his life.

After nearly ten minutes of silence, Jim finally released a loud sigh, closed his eyes, and let his chin fall on his chest. Malik looked over at him and studied his troubled face.

"You scared, Jim?" Malik asked softly.

"Scared of what?" Jim asked, his eyes still closed.

"Scared that we're gonna die out here tonight."

Jim wiggled his clenched jaw back and forth a few times before speaking. "I've been scared all night, Malik. Scared to drop off the food in your neighborhood. Scared to go in your apartment complex. Scared to buy gas at that station. Scared when I saw you and those other thugs running toward me. Scared when you jumped in my car with your gun. I've been scared driving into nowhere on a freezing cold night with no food, no phone, no fuel, and no plan. And now that we're stuck here in this cabin and there's probably no help around for miles, I'm still scared.

I have no clue what's going to happen to me." He opened his eyes and looked at Malik. "Are you scared?"

Malik gave a slight shrug. "Yeah. A little, I guess. So you were afraid to come into my neighborhood, man?"

Jim laughed. "Are you really asking me that right now? The whole reason my wife didn't want me coming to Edgewood is because of *exactly* what happened. She didn't want me to get mugged or carjacked. It wouldn't have been a big surprise if maybe one of those things happened, right? But I got the double whammy tonight, didn't I?"

"Man! It ain't always like that for real!" Malik replied. "Those three clowns in the store were gonna mess me up. I was in that store to buy my grandma some groceries, not to rob nobody or jack your car. That was outside of my control. Besides, I bet you drive down to Edgewood 364 other nights out of the year and nothing close to those things happens. You might have some dude come up to you and try to bum some change or offer you a taste, but gettin' robbed and your car stolen—nah, chances of that happenin' again are like zero, man."

"Yeah?" Jim replied. "Well, it did happen, didn't it? The main reason people from my neighborhood don't come to Edgewood is because they're scared to death of something like this happening. And what you and those punks at the gas station did tonight isn't going to help a whole lot, is it? You didn't really help change the statistics."

Malik's brow furrowed. "Quit saying 'people from my neighborhood' and just say it like it is: 'white people.' White people don't like coming to my neighborhood. White people are scared of Edgewood. Scared of thugs, pimps, drug dealers, and hoers, right? I'm guessin' you saw one of those on every corner, didn't you? Everywhere you looked, right? Because that's what people from *my* neighborhood are . . ."

Jim shook his head. "It isn't just white folks from Stone Brook who are scared to come to Edgewood. I have two black friends in my law firm. Neither of them would set foot in your neighborhood without

some serious concerns—some serious fear. I’ve heard them talk about Edgewood and this side of town, and they aren’t fans.”

Malik paused. “Did it ever occur to you that people from my neighborhood are scared about rollin’ up in your neighborhood?”

“Whatever,” Jim replied. “When’s the last time someone has had their head bashed in by some thugs in Stone Brook? When’s the last time someone had their car stolen at gunpoint when they were filling up their tank?”

“Robbery and thugs ain’t the only things to fear. There are other things people like me gotta worry about. Stuff you wouldn’t understand.”

“Oh yeah? Like what?” Jim leaned back, as Malik leaned forward. This would be a hard story to tell—and just as hard for Jim to hear.

. . .

Malik wiped the sweat from his forehead. The September sun hung high in the afternoon sky. The grass in his yard was golden and brittle after three straight weeks without rain. He kicked a clod of it and unearthed a small cloud of gray dust. It twisted around his shoes in the light breeze.

He squinted and put his hands over his eyes, hoping to see Uncle Keith’s car come around the corner. His uncle was always on time; that’s why Malik came outside ten minutes early. He didn’t want to miss his opportunity to spend time with the man.

He squatted down and picked up a stone, rolling it around in his palm as he whistled awkwardly. Just then he heard a honk. He smiled as he saw his uncle approaching in his old brown Mercedes.

Malik raced toward the car, waving his hands. Uncle Keith flashed him a big grin and pulled up alongside the curb. His car was old but meticulously clean and shiny. Malik opened the passenger door and jumped inside. Uncle Keith placed his powerful hand on his nephew’s shoulder.

“You ready to roll out of here and get your grandma?” Uncle Keith asked in his low and gravelly voice.

“Yessir,” Malik said. He latched his seat belt and wiggled comfortably into the weatherworn leather seat.

“Well, let’s do it then.”

Uncle Keith came around a lot. He was large and handsome with a clean-shaven head and a well-groomed goatee. He had recently accepted a professorship at a college out of town, but he made it his habit to regularly drive back home and check in on his sister and her two kids. His backseat was almost always filled with boxes of books and manila folders stuffed with papers. His dark brown satchel, containing his laptop and lecture notes, was situated on the floorboard behind his seat. As a man who had served in the Marines for ten years, he carried himself with great dignity. He was a man the block respected, the prize of the Thompson family.

“So, you want a chance at five dollars?” Uncle Keith said as he elbowed his nephew.

“Oh yessir!” Malik chirped. He loved it when his uncle played one of his trivia games.

“Now, how old are you?”

“C’mon, Uncle Keith!” Malik said with a laugh. “You know I’m eight years old.”

“Eight. Eight.” Keith slapped his forehead with the palm of his hand. “I just keep forgetting how you’re growing up.”

They pulled up to a traffic light. Keith forgot about his game with his nephew for a moment as he watched two young men arguing and fussing about ten feet from the vehicle. Malik could hear their profanity through the closed window. One of the kids was shirtless and covered in tattoos. Both of them had pants sagging six inches below their waists. Keith just shook his head.

“Don’t end up like those two knuckleheads right there, son,” Uncle Keith said sternly as he gripped the steering wheel. “Because where are those two boys going?”

“Going nowhere, sir.”

“That’s right,” Keith said proudly. “Going nowhere.”

“I still want to get those five dollars,” Malik prodded. “Don’t forget.”

Uncle Keith smiled as the light turned green. They moved up the ramp

and onto the interstate. “Okay. Okay. Five dollars if you can answer five questions. How’s that sound? It’s all or nothing.”

Malik nodded. Uncle Keith snapped his fingers twice. “All right. For starters let’s do a little geography—yeah, that sounds good. You tell me, Mr. Malik, what’s the capital of the United States of America?”

Malik grinned. “Ah that’s easy, Uncle Keith. Washington, D.C. I’m gonna take all your money if you keep giving me questions like that.”

“No sir. The first question is always an easy one. Question number two. It’s a spelling question. Spell for me the word ‘ridiculous.’”

Malik closed one eye and gathered his thoughts. “Ridiculous. R. I. Umm. D. I?”

“Is that a question?” Uncle Keith asked. “Because there will be no life-lines here, sir!”

“No! No!” Malik said, waving his hands. “R. I. D. I. C. U. L. Uhhhhh. O? U . . . S! Ridiculous!”

“Whoa! Uh-oh! Malik Thompson is two for two, baby. But can he keep up under the pressure?” Keith gave Malik a playful shove.

“Bring it on! I’m ready!” Malik shouted. “Those five bucks are gonna be all mine!” Malik cherished these moments with Uncle Keith. He loved how effortlessly and freely he wove his car in and around the other vehicles. He felt like they were racecars. No one could pass them, and no one could stop them.

“Well, you know,” Keith said warily, “no trivia game can exist without at least one good math question, right?” Malik’s eyes widened slightly, and then he frowned. Uncle Keith held his finger in the air. “But remember. The questions only get harder. So, do you want to have that math question now or save it until last?”

Malik sighed. “I’m not too good at math. Might as well give it to me now and try to get it over with.”

“That’s not the attitude of a winner there,” his uncle chided him. “You need to believe. I didn’t become a college professor hitting a bunch of

softballs. No sir. Every now and then you need to step up to the plate and take on a real challenge.”

Malik nodded. “Okay. Give it to me then.”

“If your mama pays you \$1.25 every day to do the dishes, how much money will you have after seven days?” Uncle Keith shot a quick glance at Malik. A slight smile furled at the edge of his mouth.

“Man! I wish Mama would pay me to do the dishes.”

“Hush, boy! Don’t let this math question put any nonsense in your head.”

Malik put both hands on his lap and started tallying the amount with his fingers. “Whoa!” Keith said, shaking his head. “Put those things away, son. No sir. I said no lifelines.”

“Ah c’mon! I can’t add without using my fingers. You gotta let me. Please!”

“No sir,” Keith said firmly. “Use what the good Lord put between your ears. Fingers or no fingers, a man has got to be able to do some basic math.”

Malik sighed and threw himself back in the seat, but he straightened himself quickly when he saw his uncle’s disapproving stare. His shoulders sank slightly, and he gazed glumly out the window. The landscape had changed drastically. The throb and grind of the city were behind them. There were no more little homes, abandoned strip malls, or battered brick buildings. Here there were far more trees shrouding large houses nestled comfortably in rolling hills. Most of the cars were passing them now. Uncle Keith had both hands on the wheel. It appeared that his carefree spirit had fallen away somewhere a few miles back on the interstate.

“Come on, Malik,” his uncle said. “You can’t have all day. Fifteen more seconds and I need your answer.”

“Uh. Okay. Ummm.” Malik had numbers swirling in his head. He couldn’t organize them the way he wanted. He ached to use his fingers.

“Five seconds.”

“Eight dollars and twenty-five cents.” Malik spouted the answer with desperation.

His uncle frowned and shook his head. “No. Come on, son. Think about it. It’s not that hard.”

"I told you," Malik retorted. "I can't count without my fingers. I just can't."

"Well. It looks like my five dollars are safe for another week or two. If only you hadn't given up and shut down, you might have just given your brain a chance to solve the problem."

"Ah come on!" Malik pleaded, even though he knew his uncle wouldn't change his mind. "Give me another problem. Give me another chance. I'll get it this time."

Uncle Keith turned on his signal and got off the interstate. They merged onto a spacious two-lane road. Malik loved this part of the drive. The houses in the neighborhood were large. The yards were lush with green grass and ornate bushes. Malik liked to imagine what it would be like to wake up in the morning in one of those gigantic houses. He envisioned his mom fixing him a hot breakfast in her big kitchen before he went outside to play under the shade of the large oak trees. He could imagine riding his bike down the sidewalk and waving to folks walking their dogs and jogging. There were no burned-out homes or houses that were boarded shut. No one's grass was waist high. There was no trash along the curbs or angry graffiti splattered on the walls. He always felt a little more at peace here.

But Uncle Keith's behavior was different. He was constantly checking his mirrors. At every red light, he'd always pause an extra second before accelerating once the light turned green again. This was curious to his young nephew.

"Did you tell Grandma we were coming this time?" Malik asked.

"Yes. She's expecting us in the next couple of minutes." Uncle Keith shot a glance at the clock on the dash. Just ahead was the bus stop where Malik's grandmother waited each afternoon. Sitting on the bench, waiting for the bus, were two older African American women and a Hispanic man wearing a hard hat and eating a sandwich. Malik watched them as Uncle Keith drove by. He pictured his grandmother getting dropped there each morning at 8:00 a.m. and then getting picked up again in the evening. This was her routine. He was glad they could pick her up today.

Mars Chapel was just eight blocks ahead. Malik could see its elongated

steeple looming above the trees in the distance, the white cross rising prominently in the sky against a rolling backdrop of fluffy clouds.

Just then, Uncle Keith let out a slight sigh and took a long glance in the rearview mirror. Malik looked at his uncle and then slowly turned to look over his shoulder. He spotted the white and black police car behind them. It was riding close to their rear bumper. Malik glanced back at Uncle Keith, who continued to grip the steering wheel with both hands and shoot frequent glances into the mirror.

“Come on,” Uncle Keith said under his breath. “Just move on by, friends.”

They drove almost six blocks this way. Uncle Keith even slowed down a little bit, but the police car continued to tail him.

The light ahead turned yellow. They had plenty of time to make it through the intersection before the light turned red. But Uncle Keith hit the brakes. They decelerated rapidly.

Malik looked curiously at his uncle’s agitated face. “You okay?” he asked.

“I’m fine, son.” Uncle Keith turned to his nephew and offered a wink.

They waited for the light to change, and Uncle Keith turned on his signal. He tapped his ring finger on the steering wheel and stared straight ahead. Malik wanted to take one more look behind them but decided not to. The light turned green, and they slowly took their right-hand turn onto the road that headed up to the church. The squad car took the turn as well. Uncle Keith frowned.

Just ahead was a gas station. The speed limit sign said 15 mph; they were about to enter a residential area. Just then they heard the shrill chirp from the police car. The blue flashers on the roof of the squad car lit up. Uncle Keith mumbled something indiscernible under his breath and slowly pulled his car into the gas station parking lot.

Malik swallowed and turned his head just slightly to see if the police were following them. They were. His uncle pulled into the nearest open spot and put his car in park.

“What do they want, Uncle Keith?” Malik asked. “You didn’t do anything.”

"It's going to be fine, son." Keith's voice sounded calm—but his eyes betrayed something else.

The police car stopped in the center of the parking lot. Its lights flashed around off of the walls and gas pumps. Malik spotted the cashier inside the gas station as he leaned forward to see what was going on. A white woman stopped filling her van, hurriedly replaced the nozzle, and drove off.

The police did nothing for almost two minutes. Malik couldn't stand the mystery. "What are they doing?" he asked. "Why are they just sitting there?"

"Tough to say," Uncle Keith replied. "In a situation like this you just need to stay calm, son. We didn't do anything wrong. Just need to relax."

"Yeah. But Grandma is going to start wondering where we are." Malik pointed at the clock on the dash.

"Nothing we can do about that at the moment," Uncle Keith said, drawing a sharp breath through his nose and slowly exhaling it.

The doors on the police car opened. A squat and stout officer emerged from the driver side. He was young, and his hair was buzzed low on the sides. He had a finely trimmed red mustache and a pair of Ray-Bans affixed to his face. His partner exited the car on the passenger side. He was tall and gangly with a mop of strawberry-blond hair. He squinted awkwardly in the afternoon sun. Both of them approached the vehicle slowly.

Uncle Keith lowered his window as the stout officer approached his side. He offered a cautious smile as the policeman came into view. "Afternoon, officer," he said kindly. "There a problem?"

The officer flexed his jaw. "You got a taillight out."

Malik watched as the lanky officer rounded to the other side of the car and looked at him through the window. He didn't like the man's grim face—or the large black gun on his hip.

"Really?" Uncle Keith replied. "I didn't know that. I can get that fixed right away. Thank you for letting me know."

"You work over here?" the officer queried gruffly.

"No," Uncle Keith answered calmly. "We're over here to get my mother at the church up the road. I'm a professor over at—"

“Can I see your license and registration?” the policeman interrupted in a monotone voice.

Malik leaned forward to take a better look at the man questioning his uncle. The church steeple in the distance appeared to be growing out of the top of his head like a strange appendage. The officer’s face was taut and unflinching.

“No problem,” Uncle Keith responded. He reached for his glove box.

“Whoa! Easy there fellah.” The officer placed his hand on his gun and unclasped the holster.

“Hub? Oh, no,” Uncle Keith said. “I need to get my registration from my glove box.”

“Nice and slow, then,” the policeman said, his eyebrows tightened on his face. “Nice and slow.”

Uncle Keith looked at the officer and then over at the glove box. He reached his hand and slowly opened it up. The officer kept his hand on his gun. Malik took another glance at the policeman outside of his window, and then back at the officer next to Keith. For a moment he imagined what a cat must feel like trapped between two angry dogs.

Uncle Keith pulled out an envelope and removed the registration papers before handing them to the policeman. “License?” the officer said flatly.

Uncle Keith shifted slightly in his seat and pulled out his wallet. He removed his driver’s license and placed it in the officer’s hand. “Like I was saying a moment ago, my nephew and I are driving to get my mother from work. She got off about five minutes ago, and she’s waiting for us just up the hill. I can get the taillight fixed.” Uncle Keith’s words were calm but with an underlying tone of agitation.

The policeman relaxed his hand on his gun but said nothing. He spent a long time looking at the license and papers. He seemed to relish the awkward lull.

Malik was confused. He didn’t understand why they couldn’t just leave.

“What’s in the back of the car here?” The officer outside Malik’s door squatted down a little bit and looked at the items in the rear seat.

Uncle Keith replied, "I'm a professor at Harpers College. Those are my books, my papers, and my computer."

Two white teenagers in a blue BMW convertible rolled into the parking lot, blaring loud hip-hop music. One of them had an NY cap cocked sideways on his head. Both of the young men looked at the scene in front of them for a minute before jumping out of the car. One of them said something to the other, and they both burst out laughing before yanking open the door to the gas station and stepping inside.

"We're going to need you to step out of the vehicle," the short officer said.

"Why?" Uncle Keith replied defensively. "We've done nothing wrong. I can get that taillight fixed."

"Please step out of the car," the policeman said, tightening his jaw again. "Now."

"I don't understand," Uncle Keith retorted. "If you want to give me a ticket, then give me a ticket. But I don't need to get out of my car—that makes no sense!"

"Listen here." The officer placed his hand back on his gun. "You can step out of the car on your own, or we can snatch you out of the car. But we'd rather not do that in front of your boy here. Your choice."

Malik could feel the fear and the anger swirling in his stomach. He started to feel sick. Uncle Keith was such a big and respectable man, and these policemen were trying to make him feel so small. Malik's fists tightened in his lap as he waited to see what his uncle was going to do.

Uncle Keith gripped the steering wheel, closed his eyes, and took a few slow breaths through his nose. His head was bowed, and he sucked in his lips. He turned and looked at his nephew. Malik felt like he was peering into a deep well of pain and anger.

Finally, Uncle Keith relaxed his grip on the steering wheel. "I know my rights, officer," he said calmly. "A busted taillight is not a reason for me to get out of my car. That's what you said this is all about. A busted taillight. You're abusing your power. You've given no reason for me to get out of my

car. So give me one, because I know that a taillight ain't a reason for me to get out of my vehicle!" Uncle Keith stared hard into the officer's face.

"John," the officer said snidely. "Looks like this one isn't going to cooperate. Go ahead and call in backup."

Uncle Keith shook his head and erupted into laughter. "Backup! Over a busted taillight? This is absolutely absurd!"

Officer John raised his radio to his lips but paused for a moment to see what Uncle Keith would do.

"Backup! Wow!" Uncle Keith said slowly. He reached for the door handle.

"Easy. Easy, fella." The officer opened the door and took one step back from the vehicle. "Keep your hands where we can see them."

"My name, officer, is Dr. Keith Thompson." Keith rose slowly from the car with his hands in the air. He towered nearly a foot and a half over the policeman.

"Spread your feet and put your hands on the vehicle."

Malik could no longer see his uncle's face, but he heard his two large hands come down on the roof of the car. He could see Uncle Keith's barrel chest rising and falling with each breath. Then he watched as the short officer started patting him down and slowly searching his pockets.

"Hey John," the officer said to his partner as he continued this search. "Go ahead and check the back of the vehicle."

"Now hold on! Hold on!" Uncle Keith bellowed over the roof. "I've done everything you've asked. What does this have to do with a broken taillight? You two are trampling all over my rights! This is totally ridiculous! You have no warrant—no motive for this!"

As Officer John reached for the back door and opened it, Uncle Keith took a slight step backward. The policeman behind him sprang into action, wedging Keith's arm behind him and driving him down hard on the hood of the car. Malik watched in horror through the front window as his uncle's torso came crashing hard in front of him. Uncle Keith's teeth were gritted and there was fire in his eyes. He wriggled and struggled for a moment but

relaxed when he saw his nephew and the tears streaming down his face. The two locked eyes and just stared at each other.

Officer John was now behind Malik, rummaging loudly through the boxes in the back seat, tossing books on the floorboard and accidentally spilling one folder. Some of the papers fell out of the car and whisked down the pavement as the wind carried them away. The two young men from the convertible emerged from the store and stood on the sidewalk sipping large cups of soda as they watched the police. One had a half smile on his face. Malik wanted them to leave. When they finally got back in their car, their loud music erupted again, and they drove out of the parking lot.

Officer John gave up on the boxes and pulled out Uncle Keith's satchel. He placed it on the hood just opposite of Uncle Keith's head. He pulled out the laptop and a Moleskine notebook. He flipped through the notebook, frowned, and set it aside. In a side pocket he discovered a few pens and a clip containing Uncle Keith's business cards and his college ID badge. The policeman looked at the business cards and badge for a moment and then up at his partner.

"You need to look at this, Stuart." Officer John handed the cards and badge to his partner.

Officer Stuart still had Uncle Keith's arm behind his back, but with his free hand he took the ID badge. As he had done with the license and registration, he took an inordinate amount of time to look at them. Finally, he relaxed his grip.

"Okay. Okay. Easy there." He took a step back. "Looks like we had the wrong fella."

Uncle Keith righted himself and, with angry jerks of his hands, tried to straighten his disheveled shirt. He turned on his heels and faced Officer Stuart.

"The wrong fella, huh?" Uncle Keith said icily. "What does that mean?"

"You fit a description of a man we're looking for, sir." Officer John scratched his nose for a moment.

“A description?” Uncle Keith asked angrily. “Care to explain?”

“Look,” Officer Stuart said plainly, “you’re free to go.” He handed Uncle Keith his ID, license, and registration. “Just be sure to get that taillight fixed soon.”

“No, sir!” Uncle Keith retorted loudly. “It’s not that simple. I need an explanation for all this nonsense!”

“And I said you’re free to go,” Officer Stuart said. “No ticket this time. Just grab your mama and go home. Come on, John.”

The two policemen walked back to their car and got inside. They cut off the swirling blue lights, drove slowly around the parking lot, and circled back out the way from which they had come. Uncle Keith just stood there with a clenched jaw as they drove out of view. His shoulders were heaving. Malik sat in silence as his uncle struggled to regain his composure.

An entire minute passed before Uncle Keith walked slowly around the parking lot to try to retrieve his scattered papers. Malik reached for his door handle to help but then decided to stay where he was. He watched as his uncle stooped to retrieve a few sheets that were stuck in a puddle of oil and grime. Keith scrutinized them for a moment before angrily balling them up and tossing them into a nearby trash can. He threw his hands in the air, giving up on the pointless exercise, then slapped them on his legs before returning to the car.

Keith sat back in the driver’s seat and slammed the door shut. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and looked at himself in the rearview mirror. Then he turned to his nephew.

“I’m sorry you had to see all of that, son. Are you okay?” He spoke softly, though the fire was still dancing around in his eyes.

Malik said nothing.

“I don’t want you to tell your grandmother anything about this, you hear me?”

Malik wanted to speak, but he could only nod his head.

“I mean it, son,” his uncle said. “Not a word.”

With that he put the car in reverse and drove them out of the parking lot.

• • •

Jim looked at Malik as he finished his story. He didn't want to speak without thinking for a moment. Malik wanted Jim to say something. The standoff of silence was unsettling.

Finally Jim cleared his throat. "That's unfortunate," he said. "It's frustrating when the cops get the wrong guy."

Malik chuckled. "The wrong guy?"

"I mean, they obviously got your uncle confused with someone they were looking for, right?" Jim said, throwing his hands in the air. "I mean, that's awful when it happens, but they make mistakes."

Malik tightened his lips, shook his head, and sniffed.

"A mistake," he said coldly, "is something that happens once in a blue moon, man! That's just one story. My uncle got pulled over three more times that summer just going to pick up my grandma. I bet you he's been pulled over at least six to eight times on your side of town. And why? Because he 'looks like someone'? Come on, man! We both know it ain't that! It's just because he looks a certain way. Period."

Jim waited. He knew Malik wasn't done.

"My uncle is more educated and more decent than most of the folks who live over in your neighborhood. But when's the last time the cops rolled up on your ride or rolled up on one of your friends, huh? Probably never. Am I right? So yeah, we got reasons to be scared too. You think your neighborhood is like Disneyland or somethin', where everybody is safe and happy. I don't feel safe or happy over there. In fact, now when I'm over there, I can't wait to get up and out of your neighborhood, man. Ask anybody where I live if they like it over where you live. Why do you think a lot of folks ride the bus? My uncle's experience ain't unique—happens all the time. In fact, if I'm drivin' your car through your neighborhood, I bet you I don't make it home without getting pulled over. Bet you!"

Jim grimaced. Silence resumed as the two stared back at the fire.

Another gust of wind pried at the roof and quivered the walls. After a few moments Malik let out a soft chuckle. Jim turned slightly. “What’s so funny?” he asked.

Malik shook his head. “It’s cold, dark, and crazy out here, man. But I was just thinkin’. I bet we both feel safer out here right now than we do visiting each other’s neighborhood. I don’t know—that made me laugh.”

Jim turned back and stared straight ahead as he wrestled with his thoughts. As strange as it sounded, Malik was right.



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