

Introduction from: *In Step With God*.
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My Walk with Jesus the King

If—or rather since—“faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God,” my walk with Jesus the King must have begun a year or two before I ever trusted him as Saviour.

Some of my earliest memories are of times when my sister, Mildred, would open the Bible and help me pick out simple words that I could recognize. Words grew into phrases and phrases into sentences. By the time I was six, I was reading my mother’s huge Teacher’s Edition of the Bible. She had slipped away to Glory when I was about 16 months old, and I owe to my father and sister the fact that so early in life I began to get acquainted with the Bible and with the Saviour it presented.

Although my father was never quite the same after his Daisy died, he saw to it that his two motherless children had a home—and that he had the kind of job which would allow him to keep an eye on them. Working as a janitor in Cleveland Spencerian Commercial School, he received as part of this compensation a basement flat which became home sweet home to us in those days.

I did not realize then what it meant for a 15-year-old girl to keep house, bake bread, can fruits and vegetables, and go to high school, let alone keeping track of her “stroobly” haired, dirty-faced brother. I know now and have thanked God and my sister many times for the happy faith-filled hours I knew as a child.

I must have been about six years old when I trusted Christ as my Saviour. We attended the Christian and Missionary Alliance church which met in a store building on Cedar Avenue. The church was presided over by a man who was later to become the Home superintendent for his denomination, the Rev. H. E. Nelson. He was preaching one Sunday evening in his usual forceful and dynamic manner when I felt a deep longing to give myself to Christ.

I was seated with my father on the very last row of the store building auditorium, and the distance between myself and “the mourners bench” seemed endless. When the pastor asked for decisions for Christ, however, I made my way to the place of prayer. There, with my father kneeling on one side of me and the pastor on the other, I trusted Christ as Saviour. Baptized shortly thereafter in Lake Erie, at old Beulah Park, I felt a deep awareness that something had been started which would make a difference all the rest of my life.

And it has!

One day shortly after my commitment to Christ, my father said to me, “Boy, (he always called me ‘Boy’—as Victor Borge says, ‘I guess he couldn’t remember my name’), how would you like to own your mother’s Bible?”

My response was quick and sure. Yes, I would like to have that Bible, and yes, I would do anything I needed to do to get it.

"Tell you what," he said, "you learn fifty verses from the Gospel of John by the time you're seven and I'll give you that Bible, and a gold watch with it!"

I couldn't resist an offer like that, so I went to work learning a verse or two or three from each of the chapters in John's Gospel. And learn them I did. So you know there was one proud and happy boy when after reciting those fifty verses, I became the proud owner of that special Bible, plus a gold watch. The watch never ran very well, but it was gold, and it was mine, and that was enough.

All my friends know me as a "gadget man." I identify strongly with anything mechanical. Thus it is not surprising that during my junior and senior years in high school I began to tinker with automobiles. After a time I built up a small business overhauling the cars of friends and neighbors. This seemed to be the way I was to go after leaving high school. I would go to trade school, learn automobile mechanics, and electronics, and have the biggest car dealership in Ohio!

Wisely enough, my father never disagreed with these plans and dreams. Rather, he suggested an alternate possibility which appealed to me at once. "You know, Boy," he said one day, "I don't particularly care what occupation you take up—banker, mechanic, electrician or whatever. But you'll be a lot better at whatever God leads you to do if you have some Bible training. Get some of that under your belt and then go on and be the best mechanic in the world! Tell you what I'll do," he continued, "I'll pay for a year at the Moody Bible Institute for you, if you want to try it. Then you can go ahead with further training in whatever field the Lord seems to indicate as His will for you. What do you say?"

As you can guess, it didn't take long to agree to this proposition. So in August of 1928 I made my way to Chicago where the faculty of the Moody Bible Institute had made a special dispensation for this under age boy to enroll as a student. My sister was living and working in Chicago so she could keep an eye on me. My Father was going to pay for my room and board, which came to \$9.65 a week (tuition was then, and still is, free at MBI), and I began to see great possibilities for both faith and fun in the future.

One does precious little philosophizing at age 16. I can see now, however, that God was leading me sovereignly in that step towards enrolling me at Moody. I did my share of "growing up" during those years and made my full quota of mistakes. I learned two great lessons, however. One was that to know and to proclaim what the Bible *says* is more important than hundreds of learned comments *about* the Bible. "Master what the Bible *says*, students!" said Dr. James M. Gray. "If you know what it says, you'll have little trouble what it means."

The other great principle which has shaped my life is that the supreme task of the believer is the evangelization of the world—beginning right where he is! Soul-winning was not left to chance at the Institute. We were assigned to what was then called "Practical Christian Work"—street meetings, mission meetings, jail services, hospital visitation, youth meetings, and so on. Always, the emphasis was not on running the meeting, but rather on winning the lost to Christ, and then following them up with Christian nurture.

To know one's Bible, and to win the lost—that's what it means to be in Christian work. Yes, there are many other phases of ministry of which we are all aware; but I venture to say that these two principles form a pretty solid foundation for all the rest.

I never did forsake my love of cars. Even during the years at Moody I worked part time at a garage on Chicago Avenue. I would buy old junkers, fix them up and paint them, and then sell them at a profit. After graduation from Moody I worked full time at the car business, telling the registrar at Wheaton (Illinois) College that I would be enrolling in the middle of the school year—just as soon as I had made enough money.

I also had some musical ability which the Lord was able to put to His use. Two violin lessons a week for some years had provided me with a good musical foundation which I now used in directing church choirs.

It seems that a young pastor from Chicago's West Side was looking for a choir leader. He asked his friend, evangelist McCormick Lintz, whether he knew anybody who could help out in that department. Mr. Lintz said, "There's a young fellow named Bob Cook who can lead a choir. You'll find him at 15 West Chicago Avenue in a garage behind an apartment house. He might be your man."

The result of the conversation was that while I was under a car working on its connecting rod bearings, a healthy kick reached my ribs, and a voice that sounded like a combination of grace and gravel spoke to me.

"Are you Bob Cook?"

"I am."

"Can you lead a church choir?"

"I can."

"Do you want to work for me?"

"I don't know—who are you?"

The speaker identified himself as Torrey Johnson, just graduated from Wheaton College, teaching Greek at Northern Baptist Seminary, and pastoring a small but growing Baptist church on Chicago's West Side.

My heart warmed to this young man. His bold and confident manner was undergirded by an evident love for God and for people. I could sense even then the dynamism which led him later to become the founder and first president of Youth for Christ International, and still later to be chosen as president and pastor of Boca Raton's fabulous Bibletown ministry.

The result of this exchange was that I became not only the choir leader, but also took on the chore of assistant pastor at Messiah Baptist Church. I lived in one of the Sunday School rooms, commuted daily from Chicago to Wheaton, and preached in a rescue mission twice a week just to keep my own soul warm.

Two things happened at this time which made a great impact on my life. Preaching in the rescue missions was one of them. Actually, I had done very little preaching throughout my years at Moody. Music was my field and whether I played the violin, led singing or directed choirs I felt content about it all.

One August night I was involved in a major car accident. A car travelling at high speed and without lights struck me with such force that my Model T Ford was overturned. As the trunk lid sprung open each of the neighborhood children helped themselves to a handful of my garage tools. By the time I crawled uninjured from the wreckage I was out of a car and also out of business.

I recall looking up into that summer sky and saying, "God, why do you do this to me?"

Fifteen years later I awakened to the fact that the start of my preaching ministry coincided with that traffic accident. God put me out of my business to get me into His business!

It was also during the days at Messiah Baptist that I fell in love. Pastor Torrey Johnson's wife, Evelyn, had a sister who sang in the choir. It didn't take me long to find a way to get introduced, then to see her home, then to consolidate, as we say, the friendship.

Contrary to all the success books, I doubt that many of us really plan our life and love in any detail. Rather, I think that daily yielding to God makes it possible for Him to guide us in ways that He has planned for us. This was so in my case. While I was busy with cars, college, church, and all the rest, God was leading Charley Cook's boy. First He led to high school, to Moody Bible Institute, then to the garage, the choir, the church, and finally to his choice of a life companion exactly suited for me.

Years later, Cedric Sears, who worked with me in Youth for Christ, summed it up. We were commenting on how wonderfully the Lord leads in one's life choices. Cedric said, "I certainly have to praise the Lord for the wife he gave me—and you know Bob, Coreen is an absolutely *perfect* Bob Cook's wife!"

Amen, and Amen!

The years moved by quickly. Three daughters arrived to gladden our hearts and beautify our home. Each of them has grown up to be a testimony for the Lord and a joy to her parents. Carolyn and Marilyn were teenagers during the years when I served as president of Youth for Christ International. More than once, they were members of the winning Bible quiz teams, and, as a part of their winner's award, accompanied me to the World congress on Evangelization held in Venezuela. Lois came along several years later, and while not active in Youth for Christ because of our move to The King's College, she nevertheless followed up her childhood profession of faith with a life of sweet devotion and surrender to her Lord. As a nurse in a large hospital, she has a moment-by-moment opportunity to minister to hearts and bodies that are hurting with sickness, sin and sorrow.

I have spent 18 years as a full-time pastor ministering in Glen Ellyn, Illinois; Philadelphia; La Salle, Illinois; and Chicago.

To be honest, I am sure I learned more from my dear people than they ever learned from me. God's people in the local church can sometimes be difficult, to be sure; but they are still the world's best people, and if one will love them and minister to them, they will reward him with a fellowship that is divine.

Walking with the King during those years in the pastorate taught me some valuable lesson. One was that you don't introduce new ideas suddenly and expect people to accept them. There has to be what the psychologist calls "ownership" of the idea. "You drop the idea as a seed thought after the adjournment of the meeting," my friend Vincent Brushwyler told me. "Then six weeks to six months later, someone else will bring it up as his own idea. Then you oppose it, and it will go through!"

Easy does it. I often tell young ministers, "Give yourself three years to introduce anything new. Meanwhile, just win one soul a week, and have that person ready to confess Christ publicly when you give the invitation on Sunday. Your church will grow ten percent a year, without question."

Another lesson learned in the pastorate was that expository Bible preaching is the only way to "last" in the pastorate. Topical preaching becomes old with frightening rapidity; but the Word of God is ever new, and if one will specialize in giving out the Word, the blessed Holy Spirit will see that it bears fruit.

Still another step toward maturity came when I learned that difficulties in the congregation will yield to prayer, when they refuse to budge under any amount of pressure or politicking.

I can recall being very upset about one of my church members who, let us face it, was in my opinion, a catastrophe just waiting to happen. A well-meaning brother, he nevertheless gravitated unerringly to the most painful part of any discussion.

When urgings and suggestions failed, I finally took the matter to the Lord in a prolonged season of prayer. Strangely enough, I found that before I had been praying very long, I was confessing my own faults and needs under the gentle prodding of the Holy Spirit; and that I then followed such praying with intercession for this brother. Like Job, who was blessed "when he prayed for his friends," I too was blessed as I interceded for God's blessing upon my erring church member.

Did God answer? Yes He did, and in ways that surprised and delighted me. In the process, the praying pastor got blessed! Years later, I can recall telling my young men in Youth for Christ; "Don't call a committee meeting—call a prayer meeting! Pray your way through the agenda and you will have a shorter meeting. Use prayer as God's leverage for getting things done!" I learned that lesson from walking with the King in the pastorate.

In 1944 I was back in Chicago, working again with my brother-in-law, Dr. Torrey Johnson, as an associate pastor of Midwest Bible Church. Growing out of a burden for the thousands of teen-agers who needed Christ, we started Chicagoland Youth for Christ. We met in Orchestra Hall, on Michigan Avenue, each Saturday evening. I led the singing, did the advertising, wrote much of the radio script, and made myself useful in general. This, of course, was in addition to taking care of duties at Midwest Bible Church.

A mass rally in Chicago Stadium and another in gigantic Soldier Field brought Youth for Christ to the attention of the Christian public. In 1945 Youth for Christ International was formed with Torrey Johnson as president. He held this position for three years during which time I directed the Saturday meetings and pastored the growing Midwest Bible Church.

That view of the mission fields of the world made an impression upon my heart which has never faded. There are millions of people who have never heard the name of Jesus Christ and who do not know the God "who gave his only begotten Son" for them. To see and feel and know that men are lost is an awesome and unforgettable experience.

I came back from the mission field determined to do all I could to raise up men and women to go into the harvest fields of the world for Christ. I found that God was leading me out of the pastorate and into the ministry of Youth for Christ. This troubled me and I began to seek the Lord for an answer to this problem. How was I, a pastor, going to do anything other than pastoral work if I was going to be true to my calling?

The answer came one night as I knelt by my bed in a tourist home in Ohio. I was on a series of one-night meetings. I was bone-weary and was about to have a very brief devotion before dropping into bed. I told the Lord that I was still waiting for an answer to the meaning of the changes I could see taking place in my ministry. Directly the answer came. I had been reading the fourth chapter of John. Now the words seemed to leap out at me from the page. "I sent you to reap that whereon ye bestowed no labor: other men labored and ye are entered into their labors." At that moment God was clearly saying, "Your job in these coming years is to reap the harvest that is ready all across the world."

My entire view of Youth for Christ was changed that night. I saw as I had not seen before that the work of the local church and the work of the missionary can be helped and complemented by harvesters. These laborers must see to it that converts are channeled back into the Christ-centered, Bible-believing church of their choice.

There was another major change in my life in 1948. At the annual Youth for Christ convention in Winona Lake, Indiana, I was elected president of the organization. The change from pastoring and leading Chicago YFC rallies was challenging and a bit scary. Managing YFC was, as one man put it, "corralling a bunch a race horses." In the nine years that followed, however, I found again and again that God will enable me. Those years saw the start of high school Bible clubs, now called Campus Life clubs. It was also the beginning of what we call "One-country-at-a-time evangelism"—an all-out concerted effort to reach an entire country with the Gospel. Latin American Mission was to call it "Evangelism in Depth" and would successfully reach many areas with this method.

Youth for Christ started as a sporadic religious phenomenon. It was now growing up. New young leaders were being brought up through the ranks and were learning, gaining experience, and succeeding.

God is the perfect teacher, and he taught this student many valuable lessons during those years at Youth for Christ. Some of these were easy to learn. Some of them were very hard. They have all been rewarding.

God uses a man, not a machine. In the beginning of YFC, and all through the following years, God chose men like Torrey Johnson, Billy Graham and the many others who labored with them. God gave the man a vision and what followed was the outworking of that vision by the enablement of the Holy Spirit.

Prayer is the price of leadership. Prayer is also the atmosphere through which a God-given directive can be applied. Many of the crucial decisions made in the councils of Youth for Christ came out of all-night prayer meetings. I cannot remember one single prayer-bathed decision that we ever regretted.

Evangelism is the catalyst that breaks down barriers of selfishness and prejudice. Christians, even those with widely diverse backgrounds, can work together if they will pray and if they will concentrate on evangelism. In the world congresses on evangelism we found that after an entire night spent in prayer our hearts were tender and people were prepared to work together to win the lost.

Personal devotions are the stuff of which effective public ministry is made. Faced with a schedule which often included as many as 8 to 10 meetings a day (I once had 13!) I found that the only way to survive spiritually was to meet with my Lord in the early morning. The busier the day, the earlier I needed to arise. If I were to skip that morning meeting with the Lord, the day would net me very little. But get something fresh from the Lord in the morning and I could share it throughout the day with great effectiveness.

Neglect of personal, private meetings with the Lord led me inevitably to failure. One of the saddest things in the world is to see the decline of a highly gifted ministry—a ministry that is falling to pieces for want of a daily meeting with the Lord. A person in this plight starts to work harder, fails more often, becomes more critical of others, and finally turns to cynicism and bitterness. This kind of decline is both tragic and needless.

Change isn't wrong if God is in it. I learned that lesson from a dear friend, Mel Larson, now with the Lord. Mel was serving as editor of the Youth for Christ Magazine, and I often shared my concerns with him. On one occasion I was complaining that many of the YFC leaders had branched out into their own ministries—leaving me feeling somewhat alone. “Change isn't wrong if God is in it,” he told me. “And look at what God is doing through Billy Graham, Cliff Barrows, Bev Shea and the others. Look at Greater Europe Mission founded by Bob Evans. Look at World Vision founded by Bob Pierce. God has something great for them, and he hasn't forgotten you.”

Gradually I began to realize that I was becoming more weary after each extended trip to Youth for Christ ministries across the country and around the world. I began to seek God about the next step.

Incidentally, I had written a number of goals for my life some years before. One of these mentioned some contact with religious publishing. Another cited the possibility of a school where one could multiply his usefulness in the lives of young people.

So it was that in 1957 I started work as vice president of Scripture Press, in Wheaton, Illinois. Five years there taught me how to budget, how to manage by objective, how to be aware of costs and what Dr. Cory, founder of Scripture Press, used to call “the missionary margin.” Repeatedly, I was reminded of the immense power of the printed page—power to change lives and to move people heavenward.

In 1961 I was contacted by William Miller, chairman of the board of Trustees of The King's College in New York. Mr. Miller, now with the Lord, had heard from Bev Shea that “Billy Graham thought Bob Cook might make a good president for King's.” Some months went by, and a visit to Briarcliff Manor, New York, produced an invitation to become the president of The King's College.

Now I was faced with two questions: Did I want to accept the challenge of leading a college which needed spiritual renewal? And also did I want to risk failing, in case it didn't work?

This had been the hardest decision of my life so far. To accept meant pulling up well-established roots in the Midwest and assuming a leadership position for which I had not been formally trained. (I was to learn later that for the most part college presidents are not trained, but rather discovered.)

I think my greatest fear was that if things did not go well all my friends around the world would be saying, “Too bad Cook couldn't make it go...never should have tried it.”

Finally, one day as I prayed in my study in Wheaton, I was led to say to the Lord, “I guess I don't have to be a success. I guess all I have to do is be faithful. Lord, if you want me at King's you can have me.”

Then peace came, and a decision was made which has never been regretted.

All of this illustrated my firm belief in Proverbs 3:5-6. If you really want God's will, and seek it, *that's what you'll get.*

