



*Christine Riffel Herbel*

In the early 1960s, my parents' work took them overseas to live for several years on the island of Crete. As a young girl growing up right across the street from Friends University in Wichita, Kansas, I often heard my family talk of returning to find their former home abroad and locate the friends they learned to love there. Finally, in May 2013, Dad's dream came true and we returned to Greece. Mom was with us in spirit. Little did we know that nine months after this trip, Dad would suffer a heart attack and join Mom in heaven. Dad's sudden passing made the many spiritual lessons derived from our journey profoundly significant, which we can share together this week.

My husband, DeLayne, and I live on the western edge of the Flint Hills in central Kansas. We enjoy rural living with our three sons. Landon and Erich are in college, and Carson is a junior in high school. I teach elementary school and savor the times I get to share the thoughts God places in my mind through writing. One can always find me working on my latest creative craft project or reading. I'm standing next to my dad in the photo, with my sister and brother.

*BIBLE READING: Revelation 21:18-21*

In my childhood home adjacent to Friends University, Mom decorated the south living room wall with wallpaper that mimicked an ornate ironwork gate. She said it reminded her of the gate at their home in Crete. Fast forward fifty years; when we returned to Heraklion, Crete, the first item on our agenda was to attempt to find that Greek home. With the help of Google Earth, old photos, and a Greek taxi driver fluent in English, we soon found the house exactly as Dad remembered it. As we approached the main entrance to the courtyard, there was that scrollwork gate just like Mom's wallpaper back in Kansas! Deep emotion overtook us all. We were silent. Tears of joy flowed, and we wished Mom could have been there with us. As the filtered morning sun glowed against the buttery yellow stucco walls of the house, there was a holy silence as we stood there taking in the beauty of our surroundings.

I thought of Revelation 21:21, when John talks about the twelve gates of heaven, each gate made of a single pearl. Reading the description of heaven is almost incomprehensible, it is so majestic. Man can change raw gold and gems from rough objects into beautiful glimmering jewelry, but a gate made from a single pearl? Unfathomable! And yet we know that Jesus Christ is the Perfect Pearl.

The joy we felt as we first saw and touched the gate on Geronimaki Street is small in comparison to the joy we will experience when we first step through the gates of heaven, soaking in the brilliance emitting from Christ holding out his hand to us as we enter!

*SONG: He the Pearly Gates Will Open*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Perfect Pearl, you are our salvation, and we know you will be there to open the pearly gates for us. Amen.*

—Christine Riffel Herbel

*BIBLE READING: Psalm 34:7*

The day we located our home, we also had hoped to reconnect with our former landlord. In the neighborhood we noticed we were being observed by the locals from their balconies. We ascended the stairs to the upper flat. My brother, David, was right behind me praying out loud for God's protection. Adrenaline overtook me and I felt no fear. A young boy greeted us at the door chattering fluent Greek. Inside we saw the original marble floor we had only known from old photos! He returned with his parents who spoke only Greek. We attempted to explain that we had once lived in their home and that the people in the old photos were us. Then we said, "Joanna," the name of our landlord's daughter. Upon hearing that name he wrote down two phone numbers. It was a cautious yet friendly encounter.

The numbers belonged to Joanna, and she was the current owner of the building! Days later, we were in her Greek home reminiscing about good times from back when she was only an eight-year-old. We had actually found her after fifty years. Joanna shared something truly memorable. Many renters had lived in that flat over the years, but she distinctly remembered Mom and Dad. She knew they loved the Lord because they shared Christ's love with her family, and included them in their lives, family, food, and experiences. Mom and Dad made them feel a part of their family.

It's easy when life gets busy to let our relationships slide. I'm so guilty of this. This day reinforced for me two things: the powerful significance of practicing audible, protective prayer, and the importance of consistently showing God's love and compassion to others, even when life gets busy.

*SONG: For God So Loved the World*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: God, help me never to let things come before relationships. Amen.*

—Christine Riffel Herbel

*BIBLE READING: Psalm 139:9-11; Joshua 3:17*

Where we live in central Kansas, land is surveyed in lots, blocks, and square miles, with roads lying mostly north-south, and east-west. When giving directions, you basically have straight lines and give cardinal directions. In Greece and during a recent trip back east to Washington, D.C., I found myself surrounded by land surveyed by metes and bounds with streets that seemed to wind in circles! Once, leaving a city bus and knowing I was to walk “south,” I felt a little like a pioneer as I checked my watch for the time of day then looked up at the sun’s location in the sky in an attempt to figure out which way was south! Thankfully, we found the compass on my smartphone!

Life is much like metes and bounds. Sometimes we feel we are literally going in circles and wonder if we will ever get from point A to point B. God promises to lead us. I like to think of the view from an airplane. Like this, God sees the big picture and knows what lies up ahead. Even though we may be meandering like the rivers seen down below, the water eventually gets to its destination! Having faith and trusting in the Lord is difficult when we can’t see what is up ahead, but remembering his faithfulness in times past helps reassure us that he will be there and that he is unchanging.

When I can’t “see out”, when moving forward seems unclear, God gets me through it and to it. That is exactly what the priests had to do in Joshua chapter 3, when they stepped into the Jordan River while still at flood stage. Sometimes we have to take *big* steps of faith and trust God to lead.

*SONG: God Leads Us Along*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: God, I can't see where I'm going!  
I put my full trust in you to see me to my destination. Amen.*

—Christine Riffel Herbel

*BIBLE READING: Psalm 46:10a; John 14:27; Luke 10:38-42*

Here in the States, we can pull around to the drive-through, get our meal in a paper bag within mere minutes, eat it in the car while driving, and still get to our destination on time, even though we may feel a little rushed. One of the big lessons we learned while in Greece is how much we rush back home, especially during meal time. When it was time to eat, we soon found we needed to allow at least two hours to dine. With most dining being outdoors, with near perfect weather and no flies, it was always a peaceful time to sit and relax.

In Luke chapter 10 Mary and Martha are making preparations for Jesus and his disciples to come. Even though I want to be like Mary, realistically, most of the time I feel more like Martha in the story. Of course, we always feel a little more relaxed while on vacation, and when we walk in the door of our home, we see all the work that we should be doing—we see clothes on the floor, a thick covering of dust on the piano, weeds in the garden.

Sometimes, the only way to shut out all the distractions, to relax and feel God's peace, is to cry out to the Lord for help. Christ knows the turmoil we feel inside. I love Psalm 5:3, the promise that reassures me that God hears my prayers. He knows and he promises to give us peace in any situation.

*SONG: He Knows (Jeremy Camp)*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord, when life seems to be going warp speed, turn my eyes toward you, slow me down, and help me relax in the light of your face. Amen.*

—Christine Riffel Herbel

*BIBLE READING: Mark 2:1-5*

It had been over fifty years since Dad had walked up the Acropolis hill to the Parthenon in Athens. Dad, seventy-eight years old, walking by my side with his trekking pole, held onto my arm with the other hand. If you've ever visited ancient ruins, you know that they like to leave things very authentic with minimal railings, and there was no smooth trail. Everything was marble, which gets very smooth and slick after millions of people have walked over it. The Parthenon came into view, but so did a narrow, steep, marble stairway. With no railing, and steps that had a short tread and a tall rise, it was not suited for Dad.

In our Scripture today, some friends rallied together and carried the paralyzed man up the steps and lowered him down in front of Jesus via the roof so he might be healed by the Savior. Likewise, since there was no stopping my dad, my brother, sister, and I formed a triangular brace with our arms and step by dangerous step, helped Dad up that flight of stairs, making it to the top! The crowd of people coming down the stairway parted and gave us wide berth.

Sometimes in life I find I'm a necessary part of a support system for loved ones around me. Without doing my part, the "team" is weakened. Other times I find myself in the middle being supported. God calls us to reach out with love and compassion to others who are hurting. Having lost both of my parents, as painful as it is, it has opened up opportunities for me to be a strong and understanding support for others whose parents have just recently passed.

*SONG: The Solid Rock*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Thank you, my Solid Rock, for sending people along at just the right time for support. Help me also make myself available to "be there" to uphold one in need. Amen.*

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*BIBLE READING: Hebrews 13:2*

How many times have you left a memorial or funeral service having learned all kinds of things about the person's life that you knew nothing about while they were living? I've left some services feeling like I missed out on really getting to know some people. Recently our new pastor, while performing a memorial service, said he felt an emotion he had never felt before at a funeral: jealousy. After hearing of the great life that person had lived, he was jealous that he did not have the chance to know the person.

It wasn't until after our father passed away and we were sorting through his belongings and papers, that my siblings and I finally understood some very important things about Dad. If he didn't know you, he would not trust you until you earned his trust. Some people never did get close enough to him to really know Dad's hilarious sense of humor, or how he would give all he had to help someone. Others, who stuck with him and were able to get through to a level to earn his trust, loved him dearly, and the packed church at his memorial service was a testimony of his genuine love for others.

Dad's passing made me take a totally different perspective as I considered the people in my life, especially those to whom I am not that close, wondering how I can break the ice and learn to share in their lives more.

Reading the New Testament, Jesus took time for people, not just sitting and teaching, but listening, too. Not everyone accepted Christ, but he kept moving forward and continued in his Father's work.

*SONG: I Love to Tell the Story*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord, the simple smile I give to someone today may be the only Light they see.*

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*BIBLE READING: Matthew 10:30; 24:36; Luke 12:7*

As an income tax preparer and management accountant in the aircraft industry in Wichita, Dad was very accurate with numbers and quick at mental math. He kept precise records of every transaction he made. On the occasional times he would accompany me grocery shopping at a cash-only store, Dad would jot down on a notepad the amount of each item I placed in the cart so we wouldn't go over the cash I had on hand, mentally calculating the subtotal, to be within pennies of accuracy when we checked out!

Ironically, as numerically accurate as he was his entire life, we are not sure of the exact time of his passing. We last saw and talked to him on Saturday, and he passed on Sunday, but the time is only known by God. Nickelback's song, "Savin' Me" music video portrays people walking about a city with a transparent digital countdown displayed above their heads, revealing how much time they have left on Earth. We don't know that day. God's timing is accurate for every event in our lives.

Having lost both of my parents at what seems like an early age to me, I could easily grieve and grovel in despair. Knowing my parents, though, they would tell me to get back up and continue serving and caring for people in Christ's name, like they did their entire lives.

It doesn't hurt to stop often and take a look at the people God has placed around you. Celebrate with them, share resources, challenge each other, have fun! God has numbered the hairs on our heads and I know that makes us very important to him.

*SONG: My Last Day on Earth (Steven Curtis Chapman)*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Father God, each day is a gift! Assist me in using it wisely and reaching out to those around me. Amen.*

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