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Let go. That's the message of love in the Bible. At first glance, it may seem like an easy request. But, God is not asking us to let go a little bit. Instead, God is asking us to let go all the way.

When Jesus met his disciples on a hillside, he said these words to them, "No one has greater love than to give up one's life for one's friends." Jesus did not just say that he was going to lay down his life for his friends. He told his disciples to follow his model. What's even more surprising is that they did. When they agreed to follow Jesus, they left their homes, jobs, friends and families. They gave up everything in order have Jesus as their Rabbi. Now Jesus was asking them to be ready to give up their very life.



One of the most courageous characters in the Bible is a young boy named David. He was an extraordinary kid who had an ordinary job. As the youngest of eight siblings, he was given the least glamorous job to do in his family. Those more demanding responsibilities were reserved for his older brothers. They served in the king's army and lived out adventures. David stayed home watching the family's sheep.

Like many youngest sons, David was a dreamer. Because he didn't have all the pressure of the eldest sons, David had free time to explore and grow in the hillsides of his home. While he watched the sheep he would practice playing the lyre, which was the Old Testament equivalent of the electric guitar. With so much extra time and an abundance of talent, he became quite good at playing the lyre; so much so that people knew him for this talent.

Another of the talents that David honed while watching sheep was that of slinging. This was the practice of placing a stone in an elongated sling that he would swing in huge circles and then release toward a given target. David would have had countless hours to practice and he would have had good reason to want to get good at this. Predators roamed the hillsides of David's home. So, if David wanted to survive or if he wanted his sheep to survive, then he would need to be good.

You can imagine David practicing his slinging on small animals like gophers and other critters. Well-practiced slingers like

David would have been able to hit a bird in mid-flight and kill or seriously maim a target as far as 200 yards away.

One stone after another, he would sling the rocks toward whatever target he chose. The rocks would hurtle through the air faster than the fastest baseball pitcher could throw. When the sling, held by two ropes, was rotated it would spin at about seven revolutions per second and the projectile would hurtle forward at about 35 meters per second. David was wielding an incredibly deadly weapon.

On at least two separate occasions David attacked and killed large wild animals; first a bear and then a lion. One can only imagine the day when David killed a bear with his sling and stood over the hulking animal as it breathed its last. And then, on another occasion, he killed an actual lion! Do you think that David ran his hand through the mane of the giant beast that he'd conquered? Do you think that he looked in its eyes and realized that he was capable of so much more than his family had ever thought or told him?

When a neighboring nation came to battle against David's people, his brothers went to the front lines and camped out there week after week. The two armies were halted at the top of two hills overlooking a valley in the middle. Neither army was ready to put themselves in the more vulnerable position by abandoning their hill and charging toward the enemy. No end was in sight.

In the context of this dilemma, a proposal for ending the conflict was presented by the opposing army. They would send their greatest soldier to fight against the greatest soldier that Israel could provide. Whoever won the contest would be the victor and would take the enemy into captivity.

One of the reasons why the foreign army had suggested this contest between the two greatest combatants was because their greatest warrior was a man named Goliath who stood over nine feet tall. When Goliath took the field, there wasn't a person in all of Israel's army who was willing to compete.

Week after week David would deliver supplies and look down into the valley and see Goliath taunting his brothers and the king. After 40 days, the young David was finally fed up. He went to the king and insisted that he get a chance to fight against Goliath. David was willing to do what no one in all of the Israelite army was willing to do. They were all so filled with fear at the sight of Goliath.

The king eventually relented and agreed to give David the chance.

At first, the king dressed David in his own armor for the battle against Goliath. But, when David put the armor on, he looked ridiculous. It was clunky and cumbersome. He was just a boy in the heavy armor of a man. Besides, David had never been taught how to use a sword before.

David was no dummy. He knew that if he tried to beat Goliath at his own game, then David would lose. He had a different game plan. He was an out-of-the-box thinker. He left the armor behind and ventured out to the field with his shepherd's staff, his sling and five stones he found on the ground.

Now, there's another side to this story. That is the story of Goliath. His upbringing would have been so different than that of David, who was consistently overlooked. Since Goliath was a small child, he would have stood out to his parents and his community as someone special. At the age of eight he would have probably been about six feet tall. Everyone around him would have assumed that his life was destined for greatness. And from childhood Goliath was trained in the art of war. He was literally a killing machine.

As David walked out on the field of battle, Goliath sneered and mocked him. "Come here," he said to David, "and I'll feed your flesh to the wild birds and the wild animals!"

David was not intimidated. While everyone else felt fear when they looked at Goliath, David saw something else. He could see Goliath's vulnerabilities. He could see that Goliath was no more intimidating than the bears and lions that he had fought before.

David reached in his pocket, placed the stone in his sling and zeroed in on his target; Goliath's exposed forehead. With the force of a .45 caliber handgun the stone crashed into Goliath's head either killing him instantly or knocking him out. The giant fell to the ground. At that point, David took Goliath's own sword, finished him off and then cut off his head.

David had done what no one had imagined was possible. Using his greatest strengths, he defeated one of the greatest warriors to ever grace the battlefield, and he wasn't even a full-grown man yet.



The traditional interpretation of Jesus' words, "no one has greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends," stirs up images of great and brave warriors. These are the war heroes that we traditionally recognize as being willing to "pay the ultimate price."

Would you be willing to take a bullet for someone? If there was a grenade that was thrown into the room, would you be the person who would throw yourself on top of it to save your friends?

Scientists would argue that there is no greater instinctual response than that of self-preservation. Yet, there is something deeper and more powerful that is written into the human heart. A heart that is filled with love stands in contrast to one that is guided by self-preservation.

This is where we get the notion that true love is connected to sacrifice. There is not just a letting go that love necessitates, but a giving up.



When I went backpacking with my dad and brother and my brother's father-in-law John in 2006, I was a broken person. In the previous month I had met my future wife Danielle. She came into my life at the perfect time. Shortly after we met, my best friend killed himself one night when he swallowed a bottle of pills in his car at a construction site.

I had a tidal wave of emotions coming at me all at once. I met the love of my life and had one of the most important people in my life torn away violently all within a few days.

When the memorial service came I found myself standing in the pulpit of my home church in Sacramento with a thousand confused and hurting fellow congregants and friends.

All these experiences became the canvas for our backpack trip that year. Our small crew strapped on our backpacks at the foot of the Sawtooth Mountains in Idaho and headed down the trail.

While you may think that I would have been strictly depressed, I remember walking along the trail and literally dreaming about my girlfriend.

One of my favorite memories from that trip was following closely on my dad's heels as we ascended the first mountain. As we walked forward up the mountain path, it was like I could see my dad's heart opening up. Wherever he turned his head he would narrate what he was seeing and the words that came out of his mouth were pure poetry. If I had recorded the things he was saying, I'm certain a publisher would have immediately scooped them up and turned them into the first anthology of my father's poems.

My father is madly in love with nature. When he's in nature, he doesn't just see nature. He sees the hand of God at work. For him, everything about nature is a love letter written by God.

I think the other reason that he loves being in nature so much is because it is his only true free time. Whenever we've gone on vacations to other places, there has always been a good reason for someone to give him a call or for him to need to cut the vacation short and go back to the office. There was always a reason for the office to contact him. One time a dear friend had suddenly been taken ill. On another occasion a family experienced the tragic loss of a loved one. So, no matter where we went on vacation, my father would end up stepping away from the family and addressing whatever crisis the church was going through.

However, when my dad went backpacking in the mountains, there were no interruptions. No one could call him or contact him. He was truly given permission to let himself go and to completely decompress.

As I climbed the mountain trail on that first day with my dad, I was so content because I could see how happy he was. Like an interpreter, he told me the things that he thought God was telling the world through nature. "Look! Look," he said. "Look at the sunlight streaming through the trees and landing on that beautiful broken log." Then turning out to look across the valley, "Can you believe how beautiful this view is? It's a great blanket stretched across the world."

I knew that my father was not crazy. He was in love.

People who are in love do crazy things. They reflect something more beautiful than happiness. What comes out of their hearts and minds is a deep and glowing contentment and satisfaction.

That is what I was feeling too. As he described his experience hiking up the trail, I navigated the terrain of my own soul to try and examine what this thing was that I was feeling. Could this possibly be the thing that people experience when they find the person that they are meant to be with for the rest of their life? It scared me. I hadn't ever felt this way before. But, something was chasing away the fear.



The process of falling in love with God is not that much different than falling in love with a person. There is a time when you first meet God. There is a period of testing and growth of trust. And then there is that wonderful and exciting time when your heart skips a

beat or two and you realize that you're about to make a public commitment.

I remember that feeling as I walked along the trail during those 12 days with my brother, father and John. I had been hiking for endless hours, watching the trail during the whole journey and letting my mind relax.

Our conversations had gone silent as the voice of nature had filled our ears and minds. The song of wind and birds allowed us all to go within ourselves as we considered the many journeys that had brought us to this place in our life. I don't exactly remember who I was hiking with when one day I opened my mouth and said the words out-loud, "I think that she's the one for me." It was more than my ears could believe. It was a 'too good to be true' moment. I stopped talking and continued hiking with a huge grin across my face. And I could think of nothing other than spending time with her.



There is an imprint that people and experiences make on your heart and mind. For instance, once you meet someone you can never unmeet them. Whether you like it or not, you are forever changed. The same is true for places that you've been. The sounds and the smells are particular to that location and when you go back to that place after many years, a vivid memory and an emotion is likely to resurface.

I remember when I went back to my elementary school about ten years after graduating from the 6th grade. The memories were so vivid that I almost couldn't handle it. Everything was the same, except I'd grown about four feet taller and I was looking down on the world around me. The water fountain was at my knees, the desks that used to seem so big now looked like they belonged in a dollhouse.

This is how Goliath must have felt as he stood head and shoulders above the rest of the world and realized how fast he'd outgrown everything.

When I walked the halls of my elementary school I remembered more than just the good things. A truer story began to emerge. I remembered both the happy memories and the hard ones. Childhood was not just a joyful experience; it was hard.

Perhaps there is no growth without pain.

One terrible memory flooded my mind. I remembered going back to school after summer break and discovering that all my best

friends were placed in another class and that I was forced to start over again among strangers. The teacher of my new class was a towering woman named Dr. Moray who was a notorious disciplinarian. All my friends had been placed in the class of Mrs. Robinson who was all hugs and smiles. Dr. Moray didn't ever seem to smile and was always moving through the hallways with the gait of a warrior on a mission. Every kid in the school shook in their shoes at the mention of her name.

Ten years later I stood in front of Dr. Moray's classroom door and I could perfectly recall that initial sense of fear I felt on my very first day back from summer break.



Throughout elementary school, my dad would take the family on backpack trips. As little kids we had literally conquered mountains and trekked through the wilderness scaling icy cliff faces and swimming in mountain lakes.

Some of my best memories as a kid were in the Sawtooth Mountains. On the first trip I took, when I was six-years-old, my backpack was not very heavy. The only thing in my backpack was my teddy bear.

To coax me to climb up every hill my mom would promise to read me another story from Winnie the Pooh when we got to the top.

By the time that I was twelve years old, I didn't need any more coaxing to get down the trail. I had, by that time, done so much backpacking that I was deemed myself to be an experienced veteran. One day, in the middle of the trip, I asked my family if I could hike at the front of the family for the very first time. They readily agreed.

Being in front was motivating. The thrill of leading the pack spurred me on and gave me more energy. Being the youngest kid in my family, I felt a certain joy at not having to follow on the heels of someone in front of me.

Being at the front allowed me to do something I'd never had the opportunity to do before—to lead.

My body barreled down the trail with such energy, leaping from one rock to another and keeping my eyes carefully trained on the trail so as not to trip over a root. I had discovered that the key to backpacking was rhythm. It was easy to backpack if you could establish a moderate pace and to keep a rhythm.

I glanced up and saw a clearing in the distance and then quickly returned my eyes to the path so as not to trip. At this point, I was so far out in front of my family that I hadn't heard their voices behind me in at least a half-hour. They were long gone.

I was completely alone, surrounded by the beautiful forest around me. I felt peaceful as I hiked speedily forward, moving my eyes from one rock to another...and then another...and then...a hoof.

I stopped immediately and froze. In slow motion, I raised my eyes up from the hoof to a body and then to the face of a beautiful deer that was inches from my own face. We were literally staring each other in the eye.

Neither of us moved.

I had completely stopped breathing. For at least thirty seconds we were both locked on each other's eyes with our noses less than a foot apart.

I didn't dare move. I could feel the breath of the animal. And then, as soon as it started, it ended. The deer leaped away from me into the bushes and I was alone again by myself.

They say that the essential ingredient for an experience to be really special is to have someone to share the memory with. There is a bond that is formed between two people when they discover something together. For the rest of their life they are able to recall the joy and the laughter they shared.

Those precious seconds with the deer are seared into my memory. In that moment, I actually formed a bond between a totally wild animal and myself. Our worlds had collided and we shared a moment together—two creatures from completely different realities.



I wonder what David felt when he killed bears and lions and giants. Was there a moment after the battle when he held onto their fur or felt the touch of skin and realized his own mortality?

The Bible does not just describe David as a kid that was underestimated by everyone around him. In fact, before David ever killed Goliath, the Bible tells us that one day a holy man visited David's home looking for the boy who would some day be the next king of the nation. All six of David's brothers lined up to see who the holy man was looking for.

David did not line up.

As far as David was concerned, he was just a shepherd boy. But, the holy man insisted on seeing the youngest, smallest member of the family.

When David appeared, the bible says that the holy man noticed that he was good looking and that he had a reddish brown complexion. Particularly, the scripture says that David's beautiful eyes stood out. Perhaps the holy man locked eyes with David and saw something different. The Bible says that the holy man then clearly heard the voice of the Lord say,

"That's the one. Go anoint him." So Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him right there in front of his brothers. The Lord's spirit came over David from that point forward."

This small detail in the story of David's life reveals an extremely important development. This is David's most important moment. It is more important than his battle with Goliath and it is more important than his famous affair with Bathsheba. This is the moment when David's heart was first filled with all the love of God. If you pay close attention to every subsequent story in David's life from that point forward, you will see a story of a person who converses deeply with God on every level.

The reason that David had no fear when he fought Goliath is because he was filled with the love of God, which told him that he would be protected in every way.

Can you imagine living with that kind of courage and faith in God? How might your journeys look different if you fully trusted that God had your back and would not let you come into harm's way?



The best part of the Sawtooth backpack trip I took with my brother, father and John was the very end.

John and I got to talking one day and we realized that the bulk of our trip had been spent moving as fast as we could from one camp to another without actually enjoying the journey. So, we told my brother and father that we were going to hang back and take it easy that day.

When we said we'd 'take it easy,' we weren't kidding. John and I took a break every forty minutes to enjoy the view. He would smoke a pipe and I would read a book. It reminded me of my first backpack trips when we would read a new chapter at the top of every hill.

Together we had an incredible day chatting, talking and simply enjoying the scenery and beauty all around us. We didn't miss a minute of the journey.

When we finally got to the campsite around dusk, after a whopping twelve hours of hiking, we couldn't find my brother and father anywhere. We asked every camper in every campsite we passed no one had seen them.

After about an hour, we heard a life flight helicopter, high up in the mountains behind us and we got sick to our stomachs wondering if they were alive. But, with night descending around us we decided to set up camp even though we had no food and no tent poles.

I strung up a tarp to protect us if it rained. I also insisted that John and I sleep next to some pots and pans in case a bear came in the middle of the night.

Sure enough, it rained that night and we scooted under the tarp. We were in torment at the thought that my brother and father could be in danger. I remember praying to God and begging him to protect them. Selfishly, I remember begging God not to take another special person from my life.

In the morning John and I made a plan to hike the rest of the way out and to contact the ranger station to see if they could help us find my brother and father.

As we stepped out of the camp and headed out on the trail, I heard the sound of breaking sticks in the distant forest. My eyes locked in on an enormous bear that was charging directly toward us at full speed.

Initially, I froze as I gazed at the bear lunging through the forest. He was moving so fast and was so much more athletic than I would have thought was possible for such a huge animal.

As I watched him, I realized that he didn't know he was charging toward us. He didn't even know we were in his path. He thought he was completely alone.

Is this what bears do in the morning? Do they really just spontaneously run through the forest?

Realizing that we had seconds before we came face to face with the bear, I raised my hands and clapped them together while shouting, "Get outta here" at the top of my voice. I've never seen an animal so terrified in my life. He turned away from us immediately

and ran even faster the other direction and disappeared into the trees again.

John looked at me and said, “You saved my life!” To John, I had become his hero...at least for that moment. For years to come he would tell my family of how I had saved his life when we were lost in the mountains of Idaho.

When we were finally reunited with my brother and father at the lodge beside the trailhead, they told us that they had taken a wrong turn and then ended up five miles off course at the bottom of a mountain. John and I shared every detail of our harrowing last evening in the forest. And our hearts skipped a beat with excitement as we recounted the bear charging toward us.

In the gift shop I found a postcard, put Danielle’s address on it. Even though it scared me, I wrote the words, “I love you,” and dropped it in the mail with a smile.

Strangely the postcard never arrived. We dated for two more years before getting married and then moving into a new apartment together.

One day, after our wedding, Danielle went to pick up the mail and returned with the most surprised look on her face. “You won’t believe this,” she said.

In the middle of the pile of mail was the same postcard that I’d written out to her with a picture of a bear I had drawn on it. She directed my attention to the address. Somehow I had incorrectly written her old mailing address and instead I addressed the postcard to the same address as our new apartment. It had taken two years, but God delivered the message at just the right time.



When Jesus’ disciple John wrote a letter to one of the first Christian communities, he said these words, “perfect love drives out fear.”

The other day I was thinking about Dr. Moray and I searched her name online to see if I could find out how she was doing. To my dismay, a website appeared with her obituary. She died three years ago. I’m sorry to say that I never got the chance to thank her for being such a great influence in my life.

Dr. Moray was not a mean teacher. She was strict. She was also a hard worker and she demanded a lot from her students. She

was tough on us because she cared about us and wanted the best for us. We knew, deep down, that she really loved us.

Still, something special happened that year in Dr. Moray's class. She began to have a lot of fun. She laughed with us and treated us like we were her equals rather than the short little pip squeaks that we were. If I can think of someone who really lay down her life for me, Dr. Geraldine Moray stands out for sure.

Granted, Dr. Moray never took a bullet for me or jumped in front of a moving train. But, she did do something very uncommon. After receiving her PhD, she went on to teach sixth graders in Utah.

The whole world was available to her and she decided to do something uncommon in order to care for those kids that the world usually overlooks. She could've spent all her time trying to be cool or popular. But, she knew that's not what we needed. She was willing to sacrifice so much so that we could experience life more fully.

Most of all, Dr. Moray gave us courage because she loved us and wanted what was best for us. When we were intimidated by the size of a book or the complexity of a math equation, she would insist that we had what it takes. And she was right!

She taught us how to creatively solve a complicated problem that seemed impossible. While the rest of the world may have assumed we were a normal sixth grade class, Dr. Moray made sure that we were being trained for greatness.



My dad still asks me every year if my kids are old enough to go backpacking with him in the Sawtooth Mountains. Personally, I can't wait for the day that I get to show them how beautiful this world really is.

One thing about mountains is that as you grow up they don't get smaller. The trees are still enormous and the vistas are endless. If anything, getting to the top becomes a little more challenging with each passing year.

Many people will go through their entire life without ever attempting to go backpacking, because the challenge just appears impossible. There are many modern day warriors who shrink back in fear at the Goliaths of life.

The remedy is love.

Love strips us bare and eliminates every fear. Because God has perfect love for us, we can address any challenge with the assurance that we will not be harmed and that no one can take our life away from us.

One of the lessons that we learn from David is that the Goliaths of this life are not really that scary when we meet them up close. While the whole world may be insisting that the giants are unbeatable and invincible, God invites us all to step forward in faith and to lay down our lives.

This kind of faith, demonstrated in a willingness to die, assumes that God's will is for us to live. It assumes that God can manage anything.

This faith only works if we let go and trust that God will take care of the bigger plan.