



CHAPTER 1

A New Day

I have heard it said at times that we never know what a day holds, but we know who holds it, or words to that effect. For most of us, our days are typically framed by our rising in the morning and our lying down at night. There are exceptions to this regimen for those whose employment and family responsibilities dictate schedules otherwise. Whatever challenges might come, whatever opportunities might abound, or whatever responsibilities might exist, they all fall within the few hours of one's day. There are occasional surprises, eager anticipations, and mundane tasks, all of which can leave you either fulfilled or frustrated—or a combination of both.

In a spiritual sense, what then might a *new* day represent in terms of one's eternal life—a day not marked by hours or governed by schedules, but a turning-point experience that sets the stage for a life journey guided by the Spirit of God; a time when one's life bears witness that he or she is not the same person today as in the past? In this context, the new day represents a new way of life in the unconditional love of God, demonstrated by the grace of Jesus Christ.

This new day came for me in the latter part of 1991. Although the specific date escapes me, the particular moment has left an

indelible impression on me. I recall standing in the bedroom of our house, telling Laura that I felt a compelling urge to read the Bible in its entirety, something I had never done before. Although I had read portions of the Bible, I had never taken on a serious, disciplined study of God's Word. This spirit-led compulsion led to a pivotal season in my life throughout the following year.

Professionally, I was a supervisor with the South Carolina State Law Enforcement Division. Personally, I was happily married with two children, ages eight and six at the time. So, in January 1992, I began my first reading of the entire Bible. It was also in this same year that I took my first lay speaking class and had a couple of opportunities to bring the message during the worship service at my home church in Latta. I will never forget the fear and trepidation of standing before the congregation of my home church and proclaiming God's Word. Feelings of inadequacy and unworthiness seized me. I could just imagine some in the crowd thinking, *Who is this preaching today? Who does he think he is?* The feelings may have been more mine than those of anyone else. Notwithstanding the anxiety, I felt a sense of home as I stood in this totally unfamiliar place—the pulpit.

Up until then, I had been living a double life—torn between earthly pleasures and secular pursuits and where I felt God was leading me. I began to sense that I had a choice to make. For many years leading up to this, I was a social drinker. This was very much a part of my lifestyle—at social gatherings, tailgating at college football games, parties, outdoor grilling, whatever the occasion. As I became more involved in the life of the church, I recognized that drinking could very well be a problem for me if I did not come to terms with it. I resigned myself to drinking only on the weekends, refraining from it during the week. *Oh, how we rationalize our sins!* The urge was still there, tempting me to drink during the week. Some days I could refrain, but there were also times when I succumbed just to get me through. I found it difficult to give it up completely. All during this time, I was still reading and studying God's Word.

On the night of Christmas 1992, as I neared the completion of

a yearlong reading of God's Word, the appointed time arrived. I was at the home of Laura's family as Christmas dinner was about to be served. My mother-in-law was stirring around, tending to the last-minute preparations. As I had a glass up to my mouth of what was to be my last scotch and water, it was as if a voice said to me, "Paul, what do you want, Me or alcohol?" It wasn't an audible voice but what I would call a sensing in my spirit—as if the Spirit of God was speaking to me. At this precise moment, every urge, every desire I ever had for alcohol vanished. What had become difficult for me was easy and entirely possible with God. It was at this point in my life that I believe—without question—God poured out His all-sufficient grace upon me and did for me what I could not do for myself. I came to understand and experience the awesome grace of God.

I have since come to realize how unworthy I am. It was here that I began to see life from a different perspective. I soon found myself making occasional trips to the hospital to visit with people from Latta or others I knew. My life had begun to take on many aspects that are associated with pastoral ministry. I have immersed myself in God's Word ever since. There is so much more that I could share with you about my personal struggles and the struggles I have shared vicariously with others. But, in all this, I have learned that people are more important than things, and serving as the hands and feet of Christ can be the greatest blessing anyone could ever have.

I have often looked back on that Christmas night and how I sensed the presence of God in what I would consider a miraculous way. But such reflection gives rise to a fundamental question, one that is still being asked of me today, even when my conscious mind is not attuned to it. Such a question can never be answered in a minute or an hour or any measured span of time. The only genuine answer comes from the heart.



CHAPTER 2

John 21: 1-19

Early on the morning of Friday, April 8, 2016, I awoke from sleep, rose from my bed, and made my way to the kitchen. Most of my days begin with my starting the coffeemaker and getting our dog and cat fed before settling in for my daily devotional time. I light a candle, which I find as a useful meditation tool, and set it nearby on the kitchen table. My practice is to start my time before daylight, so I also employ the use of a small battery-operated reading light. The presence of only candlelight and a small reading light enables me to focus on the passage I will be reading each morning.

Over the past several years, I have followed a disciplined approach of reading the four lectionary readings for each respective week, usually taking one on which to concentrate my study and reflections. Journaling my thoughts on scripture has become a welcome companion to my reflections—thoughts I return to occasionally. The reading for the upcoming Third Sunday of Easter was the Gospel of John, chapter 21, verses 1–19, which I had been reflecting on for a few days. In my meditations on this passage, I envisioned myself being on the shore with Jesus that day and His asking me, “Paul, do you love Me?” The more I read it, the more personally I experienced the passage as I began to consider and

journal significant stages of my life. I share this passage of scripture with you now as the basis for the writing of this book.

After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you." They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No." He said to them, "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea. But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off.

When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, "Who are you?" because they knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know

that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my lambs.” A second time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Tend my sheep.” He said to him the third time, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” And he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep. Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.” (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, “Follow me.” (John 21:1–19, New Revised Standard Version).