



Footing for the Adventure!

Rev. E. Stanley Ott

Vienna Presbyterian Church

1 Corinthians 3:10-11, Psalm 18:1-3

August 1, 2021

I love these summer days. As Simon and Garfunkel used to sing, “Slow down, you move too fast, you got to make the morning last!” That’s what summer days are all about! Life is full of adventures and it’s about taking the adventures the Lord has for you. Grandson Evan was visiting last weekend. We went on a hike, catching Pokémon and heading for a Starbucks to get a Cake Pop. A fun adventure. Wednesday, I rode with Dick Eagan down to the Virginia Nazarene Retreat Camp south of Charlottesville for the ordination of Rod Mateer as an elder/minister in the Church of the Nazarene, a profoundly moving adventure. Thursday was the moving memorial for Harris Miller and his adventurous life. I read the post of a pastor in Germany. Her people’s homes had been swept away in the flooding and while she was out helping them, thieves ransacked her home. A really difficult adventure. Some adventures are wonderful, others rather difficult. We remember, our truest adventure is the interior adventure of the soul as we learn to trust Jesus, the Lord who loves us in every moment of our lives.

I’ve been thinking about footing these recent days, and the idea of a place to stand. If you go on a hike, you may find moments when the trail is smooth and solid but then other spots where small gravel on a hill makes it slippery to climb and mud makes it easy to fall. Your stability is all about your footing and the stability of the foundation upon which you stand. My son, Lee, loves the sport of rock wall climbing. In one form of the sport, you put on a harness and climb a tall wall with teeny footholds to use as you climb and the harness catches you if you fall. Lee prefers the form of rock wall climbing known as bouldering. In bouldering you climb a wall that’s in the shape of a big boulder, up to fifteen feet high, often slanted so you are a bit upside down. One day, Lee took me to his gym and up the boulder I went. Turns out getting solid footing on the tiny footholds is a real challenge. I made it to 14 ½ feet and I knew victory was six inches away when, *wham*, I discovered it doesn’t take long to fall to the mats below. It’s all about the footing!

These thoughts led me to Psalm 18:1-3 and many passages like it. *I love you, O Lord, my strength. The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. I call upon the Lord, who is worthy to be praised, and I am saved from my enemies.* Stability on the adventure is all about your footing. *My steps have held fast to your paths; my feet have not slipped* (Psalm 17:5). *You gave a wide place for my steps under me, and my feet did not slip* (Psalm 18:36). *The law of his God is in his heart; his steps do not slip* (Psalm 37:31). Stability on any adventure is all about your footing and the stability of the foundation you stand on.

All of this had me thinking about one of those days in my life that turned out to be pivotal, a hinge-moment day that has shaped how I have approached many things for the rest my life. I know you’ve had days like that yourself. It began when I was a 30-year-old associate pastor at the Covenant Presbyterian Church in West Lafayette, Indiana. The pastor and my mentor, Jim Tozer, had formed a friendship with Elton Trueblood, one of the leading Quaker theologians of the day and a seminary professor at Earlham College in Richmond, IN. Elton’s

books were amazing. They have titles like *The Incendiary Fellowship* about churches on fire for God or *The Company of the Committed* or *The Humor of Christ*. Elton would visit our church for preaching/teaching weekends. I remember one conversation with him in which someone asked if he used a typewriter or a computer to write his books. He replied in a stentorian voice, “God created a connection between the mind and the fountain pen!” He wrote his books longhand in ink!

I’m a big fan of what we call the “With-me Principle.” Except for praying, Jesus Christ rarely did things alone. He was always saying come with me, join me, follow me, be a part of what I am doing. So if we are to grow to be like Jesus, we, too, use the With-me Principle to invite people to be with us in whatever we are doing. To what purpose? To grow as friends and to grow as disciple-followers of Jesus. One day I was thinking about Elton Trueblood and I knew he didn’t know me and so would not be asking me to be with him. It occurred to me to reverse the With-me Principle and to ask Elton if I could spend a day with him. No agenda. Just sitting at the feet of a master, a major thinker. To my delight he said yes and I drove the two hours to Richmond, Indiana, to his home, which looked like a small English bungalow. Elton Trueblood was 80 years old and I was 30.

I knocked on the door and when Elton answered, he said, “Let’s go sit on the swing in my yard. So around to the side of the house was a small wooden swing and I found myself rocking back and forth with this 80-year-old professor. He said, “You know, when I had this swing installed, I first had several tons of crushed rock poured underneath.” He was talking and my mind hits the first of several brick walls that day. I thought to myself, “What do you mean you had several tons of rock brought in? All you need to do is go to Home Depot and buy a couple of bags of Sakrete, instant concrete, dig four post holes, mix the concrete with water, put in the hole with the legs of the swing and you’re done!”

I didn’t say anything since Elton was still talking. “Stan, I was married to my first wife for twenty-five years, a wonderful marriage, I loved her dearly, and then she died. I experienced a very deep grief and after a while I met another wonderful woman, we fell in love and we were married. My second wife and I were married for twenty-five years and she has just died and again I am in very deep grief.” Elton turned and looked me in the eye, “Young man, build your life on a foundation.” That went in pretty deep. Then I understood why he had tons of rock put under a small wooden swing.

Elton Trueblood had made the serious study of the Bible a life-long practice and was a deep follower of Jesus. Stability on the adventure is all about your footing. The foundation of every adventure is the Lord who loves you. I love how the Apostle Paul put it, *For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ* (I Corinthians 3:11). The footing and foundation of our life adventures simply and profoundly is Jesus, the rock beneath your feet. One of the finest people I’ve ever known was Gerrit Toebe. Gerrit, from the

Netherlands, became an excellent Purdue professor and a wise elder in the church. In his fifties he was afflicted with a devastating cancer and his life ebbed away. Just before Gerrit died, my mentor, Jim Tozer, asked Gerrit this question, “Are you prepared in your mind and spirit for this, for your death, and do you believe yourself to be right with the Lord? Gerrit replied, “Jim, I’m standing on the promises!” Stability on any adventure is all about your footing and the stability of the foundation you stand on. The ultimate foundation is Jesus.

After Elton let me absorb the significance of building my life on a foundation he turned to me again, and referring to his two twenty-five-year long marriages and his storied academic career at elite universities, he said, “Young man, live your life in chapters. Further, know that there are often short segments between the chapters of your life that have great meaning.” Well, I admit it, my young mind thought, “Live your life in chapters,” isn’t all that profound, but then I hadn’t lived very many chapters yet! Now I have. I realize how intensely profound that concept is. There are chapters in personal life and in family life, chapters in work life, chapters with our health, and chapters in our church life. The longer I’ve thought about the idea of “live your life in chapters,” the more aware I’ve become of what Elton described as “the between chapter segments,” because those segments, as brief as they may be, can be pivotal moments in life.

I was talking with Dan Wright about VPC’s history and commented that Pete James was pastor for a chapter of 42 years and Hope Lee’s coming pastorate will be a new chapter for many years and that this transitional summer is just a small blip in the life of VPC. Dan smiled and said, “A better word is hinge. It’s a hinge moment in the life of VPC.” The hinge moment is a concept discussed by Michael Lindsay, the President of Gordon College, in his book *Hinge Moments*. Hinge moments are those pivotal moments that swing you from one chapter of life into the next. God said, “Abram, go forth from your country, your people, and your father’s household to the land I will show you.” It was a hinge moment as Abram’s whole life swung to a totally new chapter. Jesus approaches Peter and Andrew as they are throwing a fishing net into the water. “Follow me and I will make you fishers of people.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him: a life-changing hinge moment!

Some hinge moments are short but life-changing. In my younger days I received a letter from Professor Victor Goldsmidt at Purdue offering a graduate scholarship in the School of Engineering. There my classmate, Mike Foster, introduced me to Jesus Christ. There I got lost looking for a K-Mart and ended up at Covenant Presbyterian Church, which is why I am a Presbyterian today. There I married Ann Marie. There our children were born. That letter was an incredible hinge moment and all of those other moments were hinges as well! Pay attention to the chapters and hinge moments in your life and pay attention to your footing in all of them, the foundation upon which you stand.

There is a natural anxiety that can arise during a hinge moment and perhaps the best word to describe it is the word *liminal*. Liminal is a time between chapters, a transitional hinge time. Liminal is when you regret leaving one chapter of life, and while looking forward to the next chapter, you are also bit anxious about it. The key to navigating any liminal hinge moment is your footing and the foundation you are standing on. Are you building your life on the foundation of Jesus and his Word?

Toward the end of that wonderful day with Elton Trueblood, he said, “Before you leave, I want to show you something in the house.” He took me into the living room and walked up to the mantle over his fireplace. There was a little wind-up clock. *Tick Tock. Tick Tock. Tick Tock.* He said, “My mother wound up the key to that clock every day for most of her life and now I have wound it every day for many decades. Again, he looked at me, “Young man, there are some things in life you must do every day.” He wasn’t talking about eating or brushing your teeth. The rhythm of your day, how you begin it and how you end it in preparation for the next day are central to your faithfulness. He was talking specifically about reading the Bible and praying about the concerns on your heart. Every. Single. Day.

On another occasion, I heard Elton recommend a way to do that. He proposed reading of one Psalm every day and along with it, a chapter of the Old Testament and a chapter of the New Testament. I’ve learned it doesn’t take long to do it and have done it for many years. Elton said, “Jot the date in the margin of your Bible next to the passages you read along with brief notes about your life.” Over the years that practice turned my Bible into a diary of my life, indicating when and what I was reading in Scripture and the marking of life moments such as births, deaths, anniversaries and celebrations. My Psalm for today was Psalm 44. I see on May 28, 2008 I was at Montreat, NC and on September 13, 2013 I received my Medicare card! Notes by tomorrow’s Psalm say I’ve read it in Detroit, New Philadelphia, Anchorage, Pittsburgh, and Herndon! I strongly encourage you to try this practice of a Psalm a day and a chapter of the Old and New Testaments. Even if you miss occasional days, you will discover a new freshness in your life with the God who loves you!

I know it’s easy to say I just don’t have the time for that kind of Bible reading. Life is just too busy. There is an interesting moment in the life of Jesus Christ: *Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat* (Mark 6:31a). If anybody understood busy, it was Jesus! I went thru a five-month-long hinge moment during a time in which a daughter was hospitalized for a rare infection in her hip joint, my wife nearly died from an anaphylactic allergic reaction, and my Dad was diagnosed with a terminal brain cancer, and all the while the demands of my work were only accelerating. Busy? I get busy. We all do.

Then Jesus said to his disciple-apostles in their busyness, *Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest* (Mark 6:31b). Notice the response of Jesus to the intensity of

life's demands was not to slow down but to take time out! In other words, *don't* "slow down, you move too fast," as Simon and Garfunkel sang, but take time out of your daily and weekly life to read Scripture and to pray. Elton Trueblood was right! Build your life on a foundation. Live your life in chapters and pay attention to the hinge moments, keeping your footing on the foundation of our Lord. Remember there are some things you need to do every day; take that time out for Scripture and prayer. Those daily times of Bible readings and prayers give you firm footing in whatever hinge moments or chapters of life you are!