



Biblical Perspective in Everyday Life

Surf's Up

Biblical truth can be presented in a variety of ways . . . such as group Bible studies, sermons, and personal study of God's Word. This presentation is an example of the freshness that characterizes biblical truth when it wraps itself around the various aspects of personal experiences. Sit back and enjoy ...

I can hear the delightful sound of the waves crashing and feel the cool moist air through the open window of the truck. My sons have just gathered their gear and boards and headed down the narrow cliff trail to the beach. The surf is small but glassy and clear on this early morning.

My two older boys really wanted to learn how to surf. I grew up in Southern California and have spent a fair amount of time in the water, especially for someone who has never actually lived at the beach. I know a couple of days, however good, cannot be enough. Surfing is, by far, the hardest sport I have ever tried to learn. It is also difficult to explain the exact attraction of riding waves. On the weekends, thousands of surfers dot the coast at any given time of day. It feels amazing to be on a wave, almost magical.

I think there is something transcendently rooted in truth that attracts people's very being to surfing. Perhaps it is that surfing seems to triumph over change. For a brief moment you are the master. Seizing fleeting seconds, by your faculties alone, you conjure and defy a slice of the ocean itself and slide on moving water. It is the now. It is a moment where Heaven once again feels fused with Earth. You are wondrously connected to this delicious planet yet marvelously independent, capable of expression and beauty within the moment you have . . . and it feels truly exquisite.

When you are in the wave, whatever is going on outside of that experience has little impact. There are no divorces there, no work pressures or fears, no parenting failures, no depression, no cancer or repossessions. It's not a great philosophical mystery why the phrase "no worries" has huge purchase in surf culture. I would not be surprised if the deplorable mantra of "it's all good" had its origins here as well. I don't think there is a surfer out there who hasn't seriously thought about what they could do to manage to surf more.

I believe the transcending truth is we are all trying to do something like surfing. We are constantly jockeying to order our circumstance to be pleasant, to meet the incoming relentless change with enough skill or luck and defeat the odds . . . to somehow turn "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" into some kind of alchemist's gold and stand up in beauty... victorious.

To this day, when life gets intense and difficult, I often have surfing dreams in my sleep. The waves are always huge, sporadic, and unpredictable. Other people appear capable to wrest rides from the treacherous giants, but I struggle. I struggle to get out beyond the break. I struggle to make good decisions, to know what the wave will do. I struggle to be a strong enough swimmer. Usually, in these dreams I am filled with frustration and unfulfilled hope along with sheer raw exhaustion laced with fear.

I've been out in some powerful waves, the kind that harm you for mistakes. The experience makes an indelible imprint on one's mind. As a beach outsider, I never had anyone offer advice or instruction on surfing. It has always been a fairly lonely school of trial and error, but the small tastes of success are enough to inspire fortitude.

There is a place surfers reference as "caught inside" and when the waves are big, this can be terrifying. Without being a strong waterman or knowing how best to get under a large breaking wave, it's just an incredible fight. Sometimes no matter what your skill, getting out is difficult. Each incoming chaos factory pushes you under water and back toward the shore as you desperately try to get to the surface and paddle to make gains. Whitewater and foam are not plain water, so the viscosity provides even less traction. Exhaustion quickly sets in. Many times I have felt the panic of drowning. Often I have barely escaped the raging pull and fallout of a passing wave, and with throbbing oxygen-starved muscles I try to right myself on my board, only to see and feel the crashing weight of the next wave's violence already upon me. When you are "caught inside," this scenario can repeat many times. All of this is endured just to procure the possibility, the chance, to successfully ride a wave, to be in the ballpark, to have a shot at that magic thing you hope for—which has a whole new set of dynamics to juggle. Like I said, riding a wave is incomparably sweet. I know that many of us are experiencing or have had whole seasons of similar struggles trying to be where we would like to be. It is hard in our exhaustion to believe we will ever get beyond the breakers.

When I was a young teen, I was pretty sure my problems were quite large and a good dose of surfing would sort them out. I carried a lot of anger and confusion. I hopped a bus and ran away to a little beach town not too far from where I lived. I bought a new board, was in the water most of the day, and slept in lifeguard towers at night. Toward the end of a week, I was walking along the beach, no more sorted out than at the beginning, when I heard “Hello, Ryan!” I turned to see, of all people, in all places, my youth pastor from back home. I don’t remember what all was said. He and his wife never even tried to make me return, but I knew God saw me. He sent me some kind of love note and therefore, I was not alone. That is, at times, consolation enough to keep paddling. We want things to be beautiful but often they are just an inglorious series of calamities, turbulence and setbacks. Yet, in the churn there is His love, like our feet finding bottom.

On my surfing day with my sons, I couldn’t help but to inwardly chuckle as I walked up the beach to see my 14 year old son lying on the sand, dizzy and spinning, hand over his eyes, sand caking his hair and blood streaming from his lip. I know precisely how that feels. Though I offered nothing but gentle consolation, I secretly thought, “When you grow up, you will call this Monday.” He soon wiped the blood off and went back out. I was proud. That’s the main skill, going back out. After awhile, 1,000 Mondays of bloody lips are under our belt.

Almost 25 years after having a sovereignly directed encounter with my youth pastor on “runaway” beach, my heart remains enamored with surfing; but I am entirely given to greater things. Though good helpful tips and sound advice by victorious men can be lamentably scarce, I have learned that the Lord Himself is with us to save us and give wisdom in the midst of this heaving, swirling chaos. Spiritually speaking, He even can teach us to defy gravity and stand above the water, to dance in beauty and grace.

We sometimes have to laugh at ourselves. We really are trying to do difficult things. We want to love; we want to be like Jesus. We want to defy intense opposition, a sin-saturated world, corruption, and entropy and be able to forge change. We want to walk in beauty and be able to do the impossible. Jesus said we could. That’s what Peter walked on... the word “come.”

We all talk about Peter’s big strike outs . . . the sinking thing, his thrice denying catastrophe, the ear incident in the garden and that hypocrisy deal that incurred Paul’s public rebuke. Except for Jesus, however, Peter WAS the only person to ever actually walk on water, even if it was only for a few amazing seconds.

Peter kept trying. He wasn’t a pew sitter. Though he did blow it terribly in his own strength, and certainly must have wiped out countless undocumented times, he kept going and that was a good decision. Peter went on to preach to thousands, heal cripples, raise the dead, and when at last it came to it, died exceedingly well. Church history tells us he asked his executioners to crucify him upside down because he “wasn’t worthy to die like his Lord.” Now there is style, not mere utility, but soul.

Peter, the fisherman, was turned into a fisher of men...Salty Pete. The Master told him that his wave of death would come...and this was no “blabber mouth servant girl” knee high wave on which he began as a spiritual grommet. This wasn’t even the head high wave of threats of prison or beating by the religious establishment that he had learned to expertly navigate. This was the worst sifting roller the Prince of Darkness could inspire. Peter would take this ride. He loved Jesus more than his life. It would go down in the books, a testimony for all future generations of just how it is done.

I’ve watched his death maybe 100 times . . . by seeing the video in my imagination. Though it’s grainy, black and white and there is no sound, you can see enough to know Peter was beautifully victorious. He stomps it. The wave was a monster, 25 maybe 30 feet high . . . it was the “deny the Truth” and “avoid excruciating death” variety. He paddles into it with no hesitation, only steely commitment. His strokes were long and solid, exuding some sort of premeditated welcome as the aquatic beast heaved, pitched, and he sprung to his feet, sliding down the face of four stories worth of liquid fear. He buried his rail, legs like tree trunks, extending and arching through a flawless, graceful bottom turn then facing front-side an unstoppable speeding gushing freight train curl. As a six foot thick lip began to plummet millions of gallons of water back into the wave’s corkscrew funnel, the apostle checks his speed with a slight eschewing of his line and pulls into the barrel. For a moment, in the sublime chaos of the oblong tube, there’s the disciple, the servant leader, not hunched over but standing upright with his back gently curved, hair whipping wildly. He reaches upward to touch the rainbow of water, his rear hand caressing the smooth massive surging wall coming up from under his board. Next and perhaps most astounding, I witness that indomitable fisherman suddenly flash “peace” and grin ear to ear. His lips seem to move right as the wave closes, a white devouring tomb of fury. The man whose mere shadow once healed the sick, the man whose feet were washed by Jesus Christ, disappears within it.

For a long time I thought his moving lips meant he was chewing gum. But recently I played it back in slow motion and zoomed in. I realized he was saying something. I clearly identified two words. In the midst of this wave, the wave that would swallow his earthly existence and digest his mortal coil into the bottom of the sea, he says, “NO WORRIES.”