



NERDS REDNECKS & KNUCKLEHEADS

How God Connects the Dots
Through Everyday People



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Chapter 6

Job is Not a Republican

They say a year in prison ministry is like ten in the pastorate. So I did, like, a hundred dog years of prison ministry.

When I left Camp Snoopy, I was fried to a delicate crunch. Burned out—pronounced: Burnt. Out.

Prison is full of knuckleheads and bullies. I found the ratio of bully cops to bully inmates to be pretty even. After I battled with bullies for almost ten years in prison ministry, the bullies almost got the best of me.

Near the end of my chaplaincy, I drove down the mountain one Sunday and pulled into the parking lot at the prison. I sat in my car and wept. I couldn't get out of the car. I couldn't preach one more sermon. The well was dry. My soul was spent. I found a guard who was going on duty and asked him to tell my inmate "church" that I was sick and wouldn't be there that day.

I stayed home that day and the next, trying to regain my composure. A few months later, I finished my time at Camp Snoopy.

I decided to take a year off to find out whether I should even be in ministry anymore.

After a year of soul searching, I ended up in a small church in rural Iowa. I counted on the ratio of bullies to ministers being more in my favor out here in Iowa. Looking back, I realize that thought is laughable. Cornfields make for great hideouts.

I was naïve to think I could find a bully-free zone anywhere.

I admire a man who can, with grace and dignity, stand up to a bully. A man who can wholeheartedly listen to an entirely jacked-up point of view from a bully and then keep on smiling. That was Larry. Larry wasn't a Christian when we met. Yet he taught me valuable lessons about grace and bullies.

Larry lived across the road from the little country church most of his life. A well-liked fellow in the community, he was soft spoken. Gentle. Caring. As a teenager, Larry lost a leg in an accident, but that didn't alter his positive outlook. He was a very successful businessman with a beautiful family of three daughters and a loving and supportive wife. Larry also had terminal cancer when we met. He was nearing the end of his life.

During my first week as pastor, Larry came over to my office and introduced himself. I immediately liked him. He asked if his family could use the church building for his daughter's wedding. Of course! As pastor, I was also chief cook and bottle washer. That meant I had a part in setting things up for the ceremony. That's when our friendship began.

Whenever I spoke with Larry, he made me feel like the most important person in the room. That's a special gift.

After the wedding, I asked Larry to join us for our weekly men's Bible study. He kindly explained that he did not share my view of Christianity. He believed everyone went to Heaven, regardless of what they believed. He said Jesus was a good man but not necessary to get to Heaven. Larry never believed Jesus was God. Or the Savior.

Larry's biggest hurdle to overcome was reconciling

the God of the Old Testament with Jesus.

He couldn't get past the anger of God in the Old Testament. The Jesus he knew could never match the "angry" God of the Old Testament.

Then he called and graciously agreed to attend Bible study. At the time, I was unaware of his illness.

I was pleased that Larry attended. But it sure bugged Hal. Hal was the church know-it-all. A bully. He could get under your skin faster than engine grease. Hal's primary mission in life was to argue with anyone who didn't agree with him. His second priority was to recruit you into the Republican party.

At our first Bible study as the new pastor, I'd assumed I would teach. But Hal bullied his way in. All the guys from church were there, including Larry. Hal knew what Larry believed. And it wasn't anywhere close to anything he had to say. Not just about theology, but politics too. Not only that, but Hal's manner of speaking and the aggressive ways he went about things made him hard to be around.

I'm three-quarters redneck and don't go in for all that Kumbaya jazz. Hal got us guys to stand in a circle and hold hands to pray. I got real uncomfortable real fast. Especially with Larry there.

After I wiped the sweat off my hands, Hal updated us with the latest news of the Republican National Committee. After a few weeks of Hal, I was ready to vote for anyone with a 'D' next to their name.

I don't remember what we studied. But whatever it was, Hal made sure we knew all his answers. The biggest impression those Bible studies left on me was not that

Hal was a big jerk, but that Larry was patient, kind, and gracious to everyone there. He was a good example for me. He rarely agreed with anything Hal said. Larry didn't say much of anything at these studies.

The political stuff went on side by side with the Bible studies for months. Larry was there almost every week. I could hardly believe he continued to show up. By example, Larry was the best teacher at our study.

After about six months, Larry told me about his cancer. He never looked sick. But he was. Larry was very private. He was one of the most honest people I have ever met. Which made for an honest friendship between us.

I wanted to be an encouragement to Larry. We both loved breakfast food and we enjoyed going out for biscuits and gravy or eggs and pancakes. Redneck chow.

But as his illness progressed, Larry's appetite and energy faded, and our get-togethers moved from the diner to his living room. We talked there frequently. Larry had the best stories. As time went on, our visits got shorter. He never wanted me to see him taken by his cancer, and I respected that.

We often talked about our views of God. As the weeks went on, Larry knew I was evangelizing him. If he could put up with Hal, certainly Larry could put up with me. And he did. I did my best to be gentle, since our beliefs were vastly different.

Essentially, Larry and I argued about theology. About salvation. Only we were soft spoken and respectful to one another. Actually, I do not think Larry was arguing so much with me as he was with God.

As nice as Larry was in disagreeing with me, he wanted his salvation to coincide with his theology. He wanted salvation on his terms. He knew he was at odds with the Bible.

People will always find an angle to argue with the good news of God's grace.

Larry had a soft view of sin. When I spoke about God being angry at sin, even hating it, I could almost see him cringe. When I asked Larry what God does with truly "bad" people, he didn't have an answer.

We had dozens of discussions on the many ways God expresses His grace. We talked about how the Old Testament compares with the New Testament. This was tough for Larry. So was reconciling God and suffering. He listened patiently. He was inquisitive.

Yet as our conversations ended, he would politely say he just didn't need the grace of Jesus. He figured everybody already had salvation, and faith in God wasn't necessary.

Larry was respectfully stubborn.

Regardless of our theological differences, we were pals. As a friend, I never wanted to see Larry suffer.

Larry identified with Job. He had not lost his wealth, but like Job, Larry was losing his health and his life. He often asked me about Job.

At that specific time, I had not come to fully understand the book of Job. But I wasn't completely clueless. My problem was that I never understood the "why" of Job. Why did he suffer? Why all the mystery surrounding his losses? Why the lousy friends? What "reasoning" do we walk away with after we read Job?

What was God saying through Job?

Years later, in my own season of suffering, I learned that God was pointing to Christ through Job. Job was a figure of Christ. Knowing that would change the way I would endure suffering. If Job and Jesus transcended suffering as a means to glorify God, where does that leave me as a Christian? It clarifies suffering. Dignity, peace, and assurance can point to the power of God in me.

Suffering now has purpose. This made Jesus become very real, personal, and relatable. For me to see the humanity of Christ, the suffering and shame He took, and how that fit perfectly within the plan of God ... well, this realization overwhelmed me. In a good way. Now I saw a divine purpose that transcended suffering. If it happened with Job and Jesus, it can apply to me. Now in everything that happens, easy or difficult, I can give glory to God.

But when I was with Larry, I had not yet come to this understanding of Job. In this particular season, I too was like Larry. How do I reconcile the pain of suffering with the goodness of God? I needed to answer this question from the gut. From down deep. I needed clear answers. Short. To the point. I couldn't argue lofty arguments and be heard.

I figured the best way to get an answer on this subject was to read my Bible. So I read Job. Over and over. It was then God gave me a degree of understanding Job's suffering. I had to share this wonderful news with Larry.

That's when it happened. I went to visit Larry on a

beautiful spring day. I remember the trees were in bloom. He was sitting out on his front lawn under a huge shade tree with white blossoms. The weather was perfect. It was so still. He was there with his daughters and wife. I pulled up a chair and joined them.

We chatted for a while. That strange awkward feeling of death was inescapable. Yet the moment was still enjoyable. When the time was right, I asked if I could tell him about a sweet understanding I had just learned from reading Job. Larry was his usual kind self and said with a smile, "Of course."

No one was more broken than Job. Many people can relate to some of Job's losses. Losing a child. A business. Your health. But all of these? All at the same time? And then the "friends" that pile on? How do you speak to someone who has gone through such a total loss? It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out you don't use guilt. And you certainly don't scream at them.

The words at the very end of Job held the insight. God had questions for Job in the midst of his suffering. "Were you there when I laid the earth's foundation?" "Have you journeyed to the springs of the sea or walked in the recesses of the deep?" The unanswerable questions from God went on and on, chapter after chapter. All in the form of poetry. Beautiful, tender poetry. And then in the midst of those soft words came God's ultimate question for Job. "Would you condemn me to justify yourself?"

I asked Larry, "How do you think these questions would sound coming from the voice of God to an utterly broken man? What tone of voice do you imagine God

would use to a man who had lost everything?”

The key to unlocking God’s tone of voice would be found in Job’s response.

Job’s response to God’s questioning was humility, and peace, and repentance.

Had God used a harsh or scolding tone with Job, given Job’s deeply bruised emotional state, it would have crushed him. We saw that by the way Job’s friends spoke to him. But God, the God of the Old Testament, who is the Jesus of the New, was not harsh in tone or temperament with Job in his questioning. Just the opposite. He was gentle. And with each passing question, in the tenderness of God’s voice, Job and Larry would hear the compassion of God.

At that moment Larry broke. Almost like Job. Right in front of his wife and daughter, Larry began to shed a few tears. Then he confessed Christ. It was powerful. It was something his family had been waiting for and praying for. Larry wept. Then he laughed. He cried some more and then he laughed some more. His conversion was amazingly gentle. Just like God.

Three days later, Larry passed. The funeral was huge. Hundreds of people gathered at a large church in a nearby town. Larry surprised me. He had his wife ask me to co-officiate his funeral with another pastor. That was like a parting gift from Larry to me. I was able to proclaim God’s sovereign grace. I shared Larry’s testimony.

In those three days between his confession of Christ and his passing, Larry made a video. In it, he confessed his newfound faith. He graciously thanked me and his family pastor. His gratitude to God was on display at the

funeral for all to see.

Larry was a funny guy too. At the end of the video, as everyone was being dismissed, he played the theme song from “The Benny Hill Show,” the silly English comedian. That was Larry. Smiling till the end.

At the reception after the service, four different people sought me out and told me how each of them had shared the gospel with Larry at different points in his life. One described how she shared the gospel with him after he’d lost his leg in the accident. Another told me he shared Jesus when they were in college together. A former partner told Larry about the cross while they were in the insurance business together. After Larry’s cancer diagnosis, another friend shared with him the hope found in the cross. I stood more and more amazed at God’s wooing with each testimony.

Who knows how many “Hals” Larry had in his life? You know, the type of Christian who tends to put the unbeliever on the defensive. Who by their unloving demeanor provoke people to defend an unbiblical theology.

On the other hand, I believe that all those friends who planted the seeds of the gospel in Larry’s soul had a cumulative effect. I believe their gospel words contributed to the moment when Larry rose above his personal theology of ungrace. Through Larry’s friends, God had been wooing Larry his entire life.

Both Larry and Job argued with God for a long time. God won and then gave them both the ultimate prize.

The soft voice of God speaking to a dying man was sweet salvation for Larry.

Jesus was not so fortunate. He was the One chosen to be the Substitute.

On the cross, Jesus heard what a forgiven sinner will never hear: the harsh tone of a God who has no tolerance of sin. Because Jesus took upon Himself all the sins of all the sinners He came to die for, He heard the Father's words of scorn and condemnation of sin and sinners. This is why Jesus cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

The only person who can appease God's anger toward sin is God Himself. That would be Jesus. God was satisfied with Jesus's sacrifice. Jesus stood in the path of God's wrath on Larry's behalf. This is grace.

Larry was blessed to know the sounds of grace, the mercy in God's voice, before it was too late.

Connecting the Dots

Theology matters.

- Jesus is God. From before the creation of this world to this present day, God is consistent.
- “I the Lord do not change.” (Malachi 3:6 NIV)
- Jesus Christ is the same yesterday today and forever. (Hebrews 13:8 NIV)
- “Very truly I tell you,” Jesus answered, “before Abraham was born, I am!” (John 8:58 NIV)
- When God spoke to Moses from the burning bush, He used the exact same words as in the above passage: “I am!”

- Job knew about Jesus. I don’t know how he knew. But it is clear that he did indeed know. The following verse from Job proves it and provides another link that proves the God of the Old Testament and the Jesus of the New Testament are one and the same.
- “For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another.” (Job 19:25-27 ESV)

- Hal’s approach was blunt and insensitive. When you fight for God’s Kingdom, you don’t use the weapons of the world. Fight like Jesus. With humility, patience, gentleness, and boldness. That’s a tough balance. But

it's the Christian call.

- But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect. (1 Peter 3:15 NIV)
- Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. (Colossians 3:12 NIV)
- Over the course of Larry's life, his friends planted seeds, the words of the Gospel, in Larry's soul. God allows us to be part of an increasing Kingdom, the salvation of souls.
- I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. (1 Corinthians 3:6 NIV)
- "As the rain and the snow come down from Heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it." (Isaiah 55:10-11 NIV)
- What Larry had trouble believing was that God does indeed get angry. Accepting anger as one of God's emotions is difficult for folks. He gets angry at sin. He hates it. But He is the only one who has what it takes to appease His own anger toward sin.
- For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation [satisfaction for God's wrath] by his blood, to be received by faith. (Romans 3:23-25 ESV)

- In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation [appeasement of God's wrath] for our sins. (1 John 4:10 ESV)
- Larry's theology said he could have salvation apart from Christ. This is a common error. When Larry "argued" with me, he was showing the spiritual struggle between what he believed about salvation versus what God said and did for him. All arguments aside, the only foundation for salvation is Jesus.
- Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under Heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved. (Acts 4:12 NIV)
- Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6 NIV)

I'm really happy for Larry that God settled this argument.

NERDS REDNECKS & KNUCKLEHEADS

What does supernatural Christianity
look like for everyday folks?

Does the fear of sounding stupid stop you
from asking a spiritual or religious question?

Does common sense appeal to you?

Nerds Rednecks & Knuckleheads is a down to earth, uniquely written book that shows how God connects the spiritual dots of life. It's a witty, engaging read about the sovereign grace of God.

Jeff shares personal stories that are heartwarming, heartbreaking, jaw dropping, funny, serious, and supernatural. Best of all, each and every one illustrates the grace of God.

This book will entertain, inspire, and enlighten while you learn how to discern...

- The providence of God versus coincidence
- The Holy Spirit versus the pizza you ate last night
- The Word of God versus personal opinions

After the dots are connected, you'll see why God does what He does, and have a clear vision of His purpose for our lives.



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