



Here it is: The Missing Chapter from *Thin Places*
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Chapter # _____

Did I Miss God?

I watch the man on TV flash his plastic smile and empty promises. All I need to do is think happy thoughts, live in the land of positivity, and God will owe me a perfect life. Other preachers tell me it's my right to live trial-free, to have money in the bank and in my pockets, to be blessedly free from pestilence (which has always been a paradox to me. Don't we all die? Are we supposed to be healthy all our lives until the day we suddenly expire with a smile on our faces?)

This view of God—that He's a supercomputer and all we need to do is program Him correctly by saying the right commands so He'll give us everything we want—is heretical. But even more insidious is a more common belief: that if we obey God, success will be the appropriate outcome.

Recently a friend writes, “I have a question that’s been on my heart. It concerns your move to and back from France. Do you feel God led you in both situations? My reason for writing is I try to understand God’s will and where/what He wants me to do. The trouble is I hate making mistakes (I know God uses all of them) but when it comes to really important things it can cause a lot of unnecessary pain if I think I hear something from God and it’s not Him . . . It seems lately I’ve known people who thought one thing was God’s will and opted or changed to another course.”

Most people don’t voice difficult questions. Even so, I feel the weight of a thousand questions when we return early from France—the mission field we expect to be on for much, much longer. It doesn’t turn out the way I envision it. Worse, we don’t have great victory stories to point to, to applaud.

The situation reminds me of my solo six-week mission trip to Malaysia after college. While some cool Jesus things happen there, what mostly happens is I get very sick, end up in the hospital emergency room, and then get sicker. I follow Jesus halfway around the world to turn green. Hardly a victorious story. And yet God uses that trip to ignite a passion in me for the world.

Or the time I believe God is calling me to China, so I take the GRE test for graduate school two weeks before my wedding and (surprise!) do terribly on it. There will be no English as a Second Language graduate school in my life, at least not at that time. I feel terribly small when the results come back, but God uses it to move me in another direction, and the failure keeps me humble and teachable.

Or the time I try to start a Young Life club at the junior high where I’m teaching—a ministry that blossoms, wilts, then dies. It could be that I’m a great starter, a

terrible finisher, which certainly can be true, but it can also mean that God works brilliantly in my failures. Not in outward success, but inwardly. My ministry “failures” are God’s way of sanctifying me, bringing me closer to Him. It doesn’t look like ministry glory, but it ends up being soul glory.

I wrestle with answering my friend accurately and with grace. Essentially she asks, “Did you miss God by going to France?”

I respond with this:

The question you ask is a good question, one that I wrestle with. But upon reflection, I realize we did what God asked us to do. He didn’t promise success, He simply required obedience. And that’s where I have to rest. Looking back, we endured hardship upon hardship, far too many to list. But we came through. Wounded and battle weary, yes, but still loving Jesus and able to endure far more than we’d ever been able to before. I’m reminded of this verse:

“Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance, and let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (James 1:2-4).

Was a church planted? Yes. Was it easy? No. Do we question God? Sometimes. Coming home, do we feel defeat? Absolutely. Why? Because we don’t look “successful” by returning after two and a half years.

It’s an American idea (that’s been oddly spun by prosperity gospel adherents) that if you obey God, blessings will always follow. Success is yours—guaranteed. Your ultimate life awaits you. Striving after success (in terms of the world’s standards) in this life is sorely misguided and misplaced. The heroes of the faith obey and pretty terrible

things happen to them. I love this verse in Hebrews: “And all these things, having gained approval through their faith, did not receive what was promised, because God has provided something better for us” (Hebrews 11:39-40). Our ultimate reward awaits us in heaven.

We went to France because we love Jesus, because He asked us to go. In that call to us, He did not say, “Go to France and everything will go smoothly. A mega church will be planted. You’ll find success at every turn, if only you’d obey me.” Actually, it goes more like this:

“Go to France. Experience financial, relational, spiritual, familial trials like you’ve never encountered before. Slog your way through. Love folks who betray. Teach people. Endure. Fall down. Get back up, only to fall again. Pray a lot. And leave the results (which may look dubious) to Me.”

The deeper issue is trust. Will I trust Jesus to lead me, even when His leading looks like failure? Do I love Him enough to follow Him down that road? Or will I only follow Him where success looms on the horizon like a beckoning sunrise?

Yesterday I run through my neighborhood, my heart heavy with news from France. It still hovers over me like humidity during a Texas summer. As I run, I see a hit-and-run bunny, lifeless on the street. In many ways, I see that bunny the same way I see our time in France. Little fruit. Lots of heartache. Nothing to show for it.

But God is gracious to me. He reminds me of one of Patrick’s professors, Dr. Horrell, who says one of the few things that encouraged us as we arrived in Texas. He says, “Nothing of import in the kingdom happens unless death occurs.” France is my death. I think of that as I jog by the lifeless rabbit. Soon after, a very much alive rabbit

leaps in front of me, dashing to the other side of the street—a promise of resurrection.

I don't worry so much about missing God's highest will, or bumbling a mistake, or going somewhere where He may not lead or He may lead. I try to trust that whatever path He leads me on, that I will lean into the lessons He sends my way. To learn about death and resurrection. To go through trials that crucify my selfishness.

On my run, I notice the electric poles. They form a path all the way down to the lake near my home. They're shaped like crosses. The path of this world is lined by crosses. Many run the other way. Many prefer safety to torment (and who wouldn't? Crosses aren't fun!). But I can tell you this: my life is richer because of them.

I worry that I'll become narcissistic, where the world revolves around me-me-me. Obeying Jesus by going to France and coming back again is one of the methods He's used to root out my narcissism. Thanks be to God! Yesterday I read this quote: "We must die to ourselves before we are turned into gentleness, and our crucifixion involves suffering. It will mean experiencing genuine brokenness and a crushing of self, which will be used to afflict the heart and conquer the mind." (Streams in the Desert, p. 229). That is France to me. Brokenness. Crushing of self. Affliction of heart. A conquered mind. I won't trade those lessons for a mountaintop of personal glory any day, though the path to get there is excruciating.

I'm not sure I answered your question, but I sure thank you for asking it. It caused me to reflect and consider. Did we follow Jesus to France? Yes. And the results of that obedience are held sweetly in His hands.

France is a thin place, where my ambitions of wanting to look successful in ministry circles are crucified and buried deep in the hollow of my ambitious soul. I don't like the pain it takes to be freed from this. And often I fight the Almighty because I do love success. I love to tell victorious stories. I remember coming back to our Texas church during a particularly trying time in France, speaking to several Sunday school classes, breaking down during each talk. I sputter a few words, and then cry. One thing I manage to say is a quote I remember from an Urbana mission's conference: "When God wants to do an impossible task, He takes an impossible person and breaks her."

A friend comes to me a few weeks ago and says, "Mary, I wrote down what you said in our Sunday School class, and re-read it today. That quote still resonates with me."

So the mysterious plan of God continues on. He uses France to break me so I can bless another broken friend, who then will no doubt touch another in her brokenness. It's the Gospel of the broken, inaugurated by Jesus' broken body on the cross, advanced through our weakness.

One of the first verses I memorize during my Jim Elliot phase is a great reminder of France to me. In 2 Corinthians 12: 9-10, Paul has a nasty thorn and begs God three times to please-oh-please remove it. What does God do? "And He has said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is perfected in weakness.'" God's grace is enough. Not stuff. Not wealth. Not well-being. Not even ministry success. But His grace. And it's not perfected while we are perfect. No, it's perfected in our weakness.

Paul continues: "Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me." When I think of Paul, I see a lofty man, engraved in stone, the epitome of strength and valor—a missionary of missionaries. He

never “fails” in missions, right? And yet he fleshes himself out by saying he enjoys boasting about his weakness. What kind of man is this who gladly boasts about his inferiority? What will God have to bring me through to bring me to that same state of gladness? I may boast in my weaknesses, but gladly? Looking back on our time in France, I recount much of it in sorrow, not joy. I am hoping for the day to come when I can point to my weaknesses with a smile, accompanied by a deep knowing that Christ’s power is far more evident in my weakness than my Mary-generated strength.

There’s more to the verse: “Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.” I am not there yet. Not to the place of contentment with that laundry list of stress, particularly insults. But with even a tiny bit of hindsight, I see some beauty in Paul’s words. I am better able to deal with insults and persecutions. I am more adept at handling distresses and difficulties. France did that for me. I hope to come to the place where I realize going to France is more about crucifying shreds (and whole garments) of my pride and ego than it is about ministry success or failure.

Years ago, God asks me to confront a good friend. Up until that point in my life, it is the hardest thing I ever do. I’ll never forget a good friend’s wise counsel when I’m in the midst of the trauma: “Mary, you may think this is about confronting your friend, but really it’s about what God is doing in you.” I brush off the comment at the time, but now it glues itself to me. Could it be that the trials God brings us through are not about bringing a seemingly victorious result? In the case of my friend, the confrontation does not go well and there has never been closure. Could it be that God walks us through difficult circumstances for our soul’s sake?

It's all about enlarging and diminishing. As John the Baptist says of Jesus, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). France is the crucible God uses to increase Jesus in my life and decrease Mary. It's the venue God uses to increase my capacity for Himself. "For You," the Psalmist says, "will enlarge my heart" (Psalm 119:32). The funny thing is I feel awfully small after two and a half years, but my heart? It's growing.

There's no deep recollection in this chapter, no terrible childhood memory—just the fresh reminder of a recent journey where I realize again that I may not understand the pathways God lays out before me, I may not even like walking the journey, but I can trust that He'll do more than I expect. That's the thin place—the paradoxical ways God brings me closer to Himself, where I stop asking Why Me and instead rest in Why Not Me?

Sometimes I wish life were as easy as some of the TV preachers say. Think happy thoughts. Always be victorious and successful. But where would the mystery be? I would hate to follow a knowable, tame God who takes me down vanilla paths. In that, I will never know the beauty of God's strength in my weakness.