

Lessons from an Open Airplane Door

"For if we have been united with Him in a death like His, we shall certainly be united with Him in a resurrection like His" (Romans 6:5).

When I was a kid my older brother Jim offered my younger brother and me a nickel apiece to stick our heads into the water and retrieve our coins from the bottom of the shallow end of a swimming pool. Despite his irritation, we both pathetically refused his offer. It became one of Jim's missions to prod us learn to swim in the years that followed. One day he successfully coaxed us to dive off the high board at the pool for fifty cents each. While we both took the plunge that day, I acknowledge that I have had no further inclination to dive ten feet into a pool of water. Yet just recently on July 6, I finalized the registration for my first "tandem"¹ dive out of an airplane from Harvey Field by signing a 14-page waiver. At six o'clock that evening I watched the mandatory (and wonderful) 15 minute instructional video, met my instructor "Spotty," and put on a company-owned diving suit. When he asked me on our way out to the plane (with his video camera recording) why I wanted to skydive, I replied that I wanted *"to experience flying like a bird...though [I conceded] not exactly like it."* I then stepped into the plane and scooted up to our assigned place on the floor just behind the pilot. As our plane began its take-off I looked forward to what lay ahead. What will become clear however in the next paragraph is that my venture would at times be more daunting than I expected. Surprise, surprise!

When our plane finally leveled out and another diver opened up the door at the back of the cabin, I knew we had finally reached our maximum height of 13,500 feet. Since I had never jumped before, I didn't have the experience to assess just how long the climb up to "the ceiling" would turn out to be (from up there the buildings waaaaay down below looked far smaller than I had expected!). In addition the climb had been so steep I feared sliding into the other divers sitting on the metal floor in front of me. Minutes earlier I had imagined we were already near the top, when Spotty, unaware of my thoughts, announced (to the contrary) that we were "halfway there." But now the time had come for him to secure me into his harness even as the other divers were making their way toward the open door where they proceeded by threes, twos, and ones, to leap out into the sky. With my anxiety level now peaking, I nevertheless resisted a fleeting urge to cancel the jump and instead inched my body (attached to his) toward the exit. With our calves now dangling over the open door we then pushed out into the sky at the count of "three." To my amazement the scariest part of the trip was now behind us.

Once we were out of the plane my attention turned away from my fear to fully embracing the exciting reality of free-fall at approximately 120 mph for about sixty seconds. Perhaps my biggest surprise was that, in spite of the force of the wind, it didn't really feel like we were falling. I suspect the reason for that illusion is that the ground was so far below that you don't perceive it as racing toward you. The free-fall however passed quickly, and before I knew it our parachute released from his pack at around 5,000 feet and began filling out from the pressure of the rushing air. The experience of its inflation entailed first the sudden sensation of being shot upwards a hundred feet (it's only an illusion), only to be followed by the profound peace of floating downward across the empty sky. Spotty first steered the chute back and forth briefly in order to ensure that it was properly functioning. Then he gave me the "controls" for a bit of time so that I could experience steering it. This incident highlights one of the most attractive aspects of diving with Spotty which is that his focus was entirely on heightening my enjoyment of the experience of jumping. Back to the descent, with conversation now a

¹ "Tandem" means I am strapped together with my instructor (and his parachute!).

possibility (divers can't hear each other during free-fall), we began pointing out to each other the many geographic features surrounding us, including the skyline of downtown Seattle way off in the distance. We also noticed our plane coming in for a landing below us. When it became evident that our destination was soon upon us Spotty then began to direct us toward our target at the airfield. Knowing that Ann was seated at the observation area to meet me just below, I called out to her from perhaps a hundred yards above, "*Ohhh Aaaann*" (imitating my favorite Jack Benny line). Within moments we gently slid across the grass, as intended, on our bums. I was most glad to hug my wife, and was heartened as well to be greeted by the people who came from our Vacation Bible school meeting at church to witness my landing.

Sky diving, I repeat, turned out to be a bigger challenge than I had anticipated. However, in spite of the scattered disconcerting moments prior to the leap, I regard it as an awesome experience. I want to state that I did not undertake this jump as a dare, but because I expected it would be enjoyable and amazing entirely on its own terms. I acknowledge that, at the moment I landed on the ground, I said to myself, "*Well, once is enough.*" But now, upon further reflection, God-willing (and Ann-willing), I can imagine repeating it, not as a hobby, but occasionally, in the future.

I think my account accurately reflects that my greatest challenge pertained to the general anxiety over what lay unexpectedly ahead of me. As for the implications of this experience with respect to Christianity, I am not equating the Christian faith with jumping out of a plane. But there are certain parallels. Christian belief according to the Bible involves at least three facets. Firstly, faith is not merely the intellectual exercise of reflecting on the Bible and Christian doctrine from the comfort of a chair, but instead entails the personal experience of our life under God in Christ amidst the rough and tumble of daily life. Put another way, Christian belief is a matter of personally entrusting our security and safety to Jesus Christ and thereby living out His lordship through thick and thin (1 Peter 4:12). Secondly and consequently, Christianity is an all-or-nothing proposition. It is not a half-way kind of trust, but a matter of entirely (Rom. 3:28, Galatians 2:21) entrusting our lives to the providential care of the living God so that we actually take the plunge out of our comfort zone by stepping out into faith. Thirdly, salvation is experienced by our actually being joined to Christ and His finished work on our behalf by His death on the cross for our sins and His resurrection from the dead (Romans 4:25). On the video referenced below I can be heard saying to my instructor a few minutes before we jumped out of the plane together, "*My life is in your hands.*" My well-being was indeed entirely dependent on my being attached to the one who was wearing the parachute! So also the Apostle Paul declares (see the verse below my title) that experiencing salvation in Christ is a matter of our being united with His saving work by our faith in Him. This reality is indeed what Paul notes is ours by virtue of our baptism into Christ (Rom. 6:4).

My personal, professionally made video can be accessed on the internet at the following address:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dTJ4kHFggPO>

Your servant Pastor,

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