

"Don't read this unless you are ready to be wrecked for everything God loves."  
—GABE LYONS, founder of Q, bestselling author of *The Next Christians*

W O R D S

FROM THE HILL

an invitation to the unexpected

stu garrard

of thirst  
hungry and  
Spirit mourning meek hungry and thirsty  
persecuted are blessed God is on your side persecution  
persecuted Mourn meek hungry and thirsty Mercy pure  
brokenhearted disenfranchised hungry and thirsty me

Someone once introduced President Jimmy Carter as a man who used the White House as a stepping-stone to do great things with his life. Stu G has done the same, using his career as an award-winning rock star as a stepping-stone to do great things with his life. There's no message more important for the contemporary world than the words of Jesus, the "red letters" in the Bible. Stu dives into the heart of those red letters in this book on the Beatitudes. I know that his words will move the world just as his music has. I'm honored to call him a friend.

**SHANE CLAIBORNE**

Author, activist, and recovering sinner

One Sunday night this fall, Stu sat in our kitchen, and instead of playing his own songs, he played songs from men and women he had befriended in his travels. Instead of telling his own stories, he told the stories of people who'd been abused, forgotten, marginalized. Stu is a man who is using his voice to lift people up, who is using his talent to draw out the talent of others, who is using his influence to tell a story of hope. This book is story after story of hope, and I can't think of a more timely message or a more generous and wise messenger.

**SHAUNA NIEQUIST**

*New York Times* bestselling author

In *Words from the Hill* we have Stu G's unique exploration and application of Christ's Sermon on the Mount. It's a reflective, disruptive memoir, beautiful and quietly incendiary—a book well written by a life well lived.

**PETE GREIG**

Author of *Dirty Glory: Go Where Your Best Prayers Take You* and founder of 24-7 Prayer

I've loved watching Stu explore the Beatitudes in the writing of this book, making friends and discovering their stories along the way. Stu's honesty and compassion have helped me hear these well-known words of Jesus in a whole new light—as announcements of kindness, mercy, peace, and his presence for us all. You will love it!

**AMY GRANT**

Singer, songwriter, and author of *Mosaic: Pieces of My Life So Far*

Stu G has successfully penned a book on the Beatitudes that is teeming with wisdom, heart, and practical insights. Never has the world felt more riven and ready for this fresh take on Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Blessed are those who read this divinely timed book.

**IAN MORGAN CRON**

Bestselling author of *Chasing Francis: A Pilgrim's Tale* and *The Road Back to You: An Enneagram Journey to Self-Discovery*

Think you know all you need to know about the Beatitudes? Think again. Enter this book with holy curiosity, and you'll discover stories that will change your life—stories of ordinary people who chose to “collude with the power of love” and experienced the blessed presence of God in ways they never imagined. I love this book!

**LYNNE HYBELS**

Advocate for Global Engagement, Willow Creek Community Church, and author of *Nice Girls Don't Change the World*

For a brokenhearted world comes the unexpected, upside-down announcement that God is on your side, writes Stu G in this remarkable manifesto of hope. *Words from the Hill* offers life-saving food for starving people. Here is the good news that Stu carves onto every page: God is always available to us and is fully present in the ache, the lack, the “not-yet-ness” of life.

**STEVE WIENS**

Author of *Beginnings: The First Seven Days of the Rest of Your Life*

Stu's honest and poetic voice gives new life to some of the oldest truths in the world. I am grateful that he has used his gifts to promote love's healing power through the lenses of the Beatitudes. His book teaches us how to walk more gracefully in this harsh world.

**BECCA STEVENS**

Founder and president of Thistle Farms and 2016 CNN Hero

With clarity and compassion, Stu takes us on a journey into God's upside-down world. Don't read this unless you are ready to be wrecked for everything God loves.

**GABE LYONS**

Author of *Good Faith: Being a Christian When Society Thinks You're Irrelevant and Extreme* with David Kinnaman and founder of Q Ideas

When Jesus spoke the eight simple lines that we call the Beatitudes, he offered his listeners an alternate way to look at life, a different way to experience God. Stu Garrard invites us into a beautifully written, unfolding story to explore this unexpected way of living with God. He introduces us to people from the bright lights of the rich and famous to the shadows of death row who have each encountered this surprising transformation. I highly recommend *Words from the Hill* for those ready to join this journey.

**TIM DAY**

Author of *God Enters Stage Left*

Stu G writes like he plays. He weaves the new with the old, the passionate with the vulnerable. *Words from the Hill* is an honest, beautiful book from a man who paints with his fingers the stories that his heart perceives.

**CRAIG BORLASE**

Author of *Fleeing ISIS*, *Finding Jesus: The Real Story of God at Work* with Charles Morris, *10,000 Reasons: Stories of Faith, Hope, and Thankfulness Inspired by the Worship Anthem* with Matt Redman, and *Finding Gobi: A Little Dog with a Very Big Heart* with Dion Leonard

I can think of no one better to craft a story as in-depth as this one. Mark and I have known and loved Stu G and his family for many years. His approach to life has always been thought-provoking, creative, and generous, with a hunger for truth and a passion to continually communicate the pure gospel through the arts. Here

he explores the Beatitudes in all their depth and raw truth. I know this book and these songs will challenge and inspire you to find the unexpected blessings in the announcements of Jesus.

**DARLENE ZSCHECH**

Worship leader and singer-songwriter

Of all of Christ's teachings, few feel as timely and desperately needed today as the Beatitudes. Stu G has been courageously immersing himself in this deep stream for years. With keen insights, fresh language, heart-stretching stories, and the stunning melodies of an accompanying album, *Words from the Hill* is a unique and uniquely important invitation into the Way of Jesus.

**AARON NIEQUIST**

Worship leader and curator of *The Practice* and *A New Liturgy*

In *Words from the Hill: An Invitation to the Unexpected*, Stu Garrard captures the surprising and challenging call of the Beatitudes. Through inspiring artistry and compelling storytelling, Stu brings fresh eyes to this ancient text. What is particularly apparent is that Stu's own heart has been awakened to the beauty and confrontation of the words of Jesus. As highly involved members of our church, Stu and Karen continue to wrestle with what it means to live out these words right where they live. For years, Stu's friends have been telling him to write a book. Read this and find out why.

**DARREN WHITEHEAD**

Senior pastor of Church of the City and author of *Rumors of God* with Jon Tyson

stu garrard

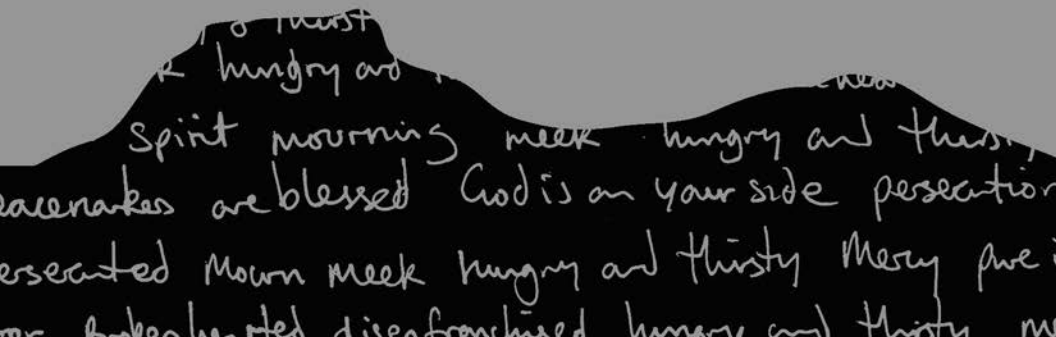
# WORDS

## FROM THE HILL

an invitation to the unexpected

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*Words from the Hill: An Invitation to the Unexpected*

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# CONTENTS

**Acknowledgments** *xi*

**INTRO: OF LIFE'S UNEXPECTED PLACES** *xv*

**CHAPTER 1: POOR IN SPIRIT—WHAT YOU FIND AT THE  
END OF YOUR ROPE** *1*

**CHAPTER 2: MOURN—THE GRIEF OF CHANGE** *23*

**CHAPTER 3: MEEK—WHEN PRESENCE IS IGNORED** *39*

**CHAPTER 4: HUNGER AND THIRST—BLESSING OR  
REQUIREMENT?** *73*

**CHAPTER 5: MERCY—GETTING CAUGHT IN THE RAIN** *95*

**CHAPTER 6: PURE IN HEART—THE WONDER OF IT ALL** *125*

**CHAPTER 7: PEACEMAKERS—LIVING IN THE CONTESTED  
SPACE** *145*

**CHAPTER 8: PERSECUTED—HOLY TROUBLEMAKERS** *173*

**OUTRO: THE VIEW FROM UP HERE** *205*

**Engage** *213*

**Notes** *215*



# OF LIFE'S UNEXPECTED PLACES

**3:15 A.M.** Thursday, July 26, 2012. Emergency room, Vanderbilt Hospital, Nashville.

*I hadn't planned on this today.*

*It was supposed to be a quiet day. Maybe run a few errands, walk the dog, finish some edits I started yesterday. Maybe see if that new coffee shop is as good as people are saying it is. And yet here I am, sitting beside my wife in an emergency room.*

*Karen hasn't been well for a few weeks, so earlier today she finally went to the walk-in clinic. Nothing major, she thought, just the sort of unwell that would need a few pills to blast it away. The doctor thought otherwise. It only took a few minutes before he was telling her to go to the emergency room straightaway. He said she was the sort of unwell that needed some new blood.*

*We've been here for almost eleven hours. Karen's in a bed and I'm sitting beside her, trying to smile reassuringly. We're like an old couple. I thought we had decades ahead of us before we'd be comforting each other at a hospital bedside, but what can you do?*

*So far there have been tests and scans and consults with doctors who have perfect teeth and a warm, reassuring manner. They have*

*told us that Karen needs surgery. We have told them that we have no health insurance.*

*Today has not gone how I expected.*

Am I alone, or is this just how life goes?

We all experience those twists and turns. Some doors opening, some doors closing . . . it just happens. Life can change in an instant (or as we say in England, “turn on a sixpence!”).

It just does.

Turns out Karen had a tumor the size of a tennis ball that was making her really sick. She was bleeding continuously. Thankfully the tumor was benign, and treatment straightaway, along with surgery to remove it in January 2013, was completely successful. But I know a lot of stories don’t end that way.

That day in the hospital, I was thinking about Karen all the time. I wasn’t complaining or feeling frustrated. The unexpected had completely interrupted my day, but that was okay. All that mattered was here and now and how to make Karen comfortable and get her better.

So I prayed. Not in an “I’m expecting a miracle” kind of way. Something more like “Help.”

And in the midst of those terrifying hours, I had some kind of sense that God was not far away. There was something of the divine in the uncertainty, in the worry, in the hospital, in the here and now.



That day in the hospital happened in the middle of a lot of uncertainties, a lot of worries. In the middle of a huge transition.

It all started in 2008. I was in my forties and had spent the

previous sixteen years in the job of a lifetime, making music with friends who were like family. And then, on a hot, muggy summer's day in Texas, we had a meeting that made clear that season was coming to an end. It was unexpected. It was hard. When the job ended in 2009, we were all trying to end well and treat one another as best we could, but I was already wrestling with God and a monster called Self-Doubt.

In 2010, I moved my family (complete with our dog, Buddy) from our home on the south coast of England to Nashville, Tennessee, and began making my way towards a new freelance career. A new country, a new opportunity . . . but very different ways of doing things in every single area of life. My visa said "Alien of Extraordinary Ability." I just felt like an alien.

Two years later, as Karen lay in that hospital bed, we weren't so different, she and I. I needed some new blood in my veins too . . . some fresh life.

Karen's new lifeblood came from refrigerated bags and incredible care from the staff at Vanderbilt. And mine? I started the journey to find mine when I began to accept that I am not in control. And there, at the bottom of all things, God met me.

Here's the thing. I want safety and comfort, but I have discovered that these are mere illusions sold to us by this modern life (and insurance companies). We all hope for the perfect outcome, but life doesn't follow our instructions.

This is nothing new. Jesus delivered what is considered to be his most complete sermon on this subject. We are not in control. Life does not always work out the way we expect it to. And, he tells us, when we find ourselves at the end of our rope, at rock bottom, God is there. God is on our side.

I began to find my new lifeblood in that sermon, and

particularly in the passage known as the Beatitudes, some of the most brilliant and poignant words ever spoken. In the midst of my uncertainty and this second act of my life, the one where nothing went as planned, these words took me over, consumed me, began to define how I looked at the world and how I responded to it. These words became an invitation to the unexpected. And they might just be the same for you.



But before we do anything else, I want us to consider a fascinating question my friend Rabbi Joseph asked me: *What does it mean to listen?*

I thought about that question, and I thought about the Beatitudes. What does it mean to listen like the people on the hill in the first century listened? There were no screens to read from, no devices to make notes on, no band to warm everyone up. Have we lost the ability to hear like that, to remember what we hear and put it into action in our lives?

I don't have the precise answer to this question of how to listen, but what I do have is my experience of being a musician onstage. And I think that perspective shows us something.

Onstage, we have a guide, which is the song. (In this instance, we have the Beatitudes.) Onstage, the musicians have to listen constantly to the rest of the band so they are always staying in harmony, not off playing music on their own. Listening—and learning—in community.

And in a band, it's not just a onetime performance. Just because the band plays successfully once doesn't mean they can rely on that for the future. They have to practice. They have

to keep retuning their instruments. They have to keep playing the song.

So as we listen, as we learn how to listen, we need to replace certainty with humility, with curiosity. Because I can guess what some of you are thinking right about now: *The Beatitudes? I know all about the meek and poor in spirit and peacemaking stuff—it's good, sure, but I know all I need to know about it.* Right around the “Blessed are the . . .” we can tune out or nod our heads in acknowledgment and move on. But there's so much more. And we need to keep on discovering and pushing in, because this sacred text is living and breathing and full of permanent surplus meaning that will fill and make sense of life when it feels out of our control.

And how we get there might surprise us. Because it means listening in ways we don't usually listen when it comes to the Beatitudes. The invitation is to lift our eyes from the text for a moment, and from what we think we know of it. To lift our eyes from our devices, and see and hear these words in a different way.

See, I have some amazing people in my life, people who have encouraged and journeyed with me. People who have known me at my worst and at my best and have wanted to be my friend through it all, as well as new friends that I'm so lucky to have met. You will meet some of them in this book. And they'll help us see that the Beatitudes are not what so many people think they are. That these words are so much more than an instruction manual for living a good life, or some kind of spiritual ladder to climb.

As I've listened to our Teacher's words and to the people whose lives are living, breathing examples of them, I've realized

something. Maybe there's a better way to read and live by these announcements. Maybe they could just offer us the most amazing good news you could ever hope to read: that God is always available to us and is fully present in the ache, the lack, the "not-yet-ness" of life.

I've sat on the hillside overlooking the Sea of Galilee where scholars tell us Jesus uttered these words, and in my mind I'm there now. Here is my invitation to you, from one broken human to another: If control is just an illusion, and life follows a different trail than the one we might have hoped for, how about we go exploring together? With Jesus' words as our compass and the insight from wise guides I've met along the way, how about we see if we can figure out some of the things that really matter in life?

Jesus has something for each of us here. It's time to release our need for control and accept his invitation to make sense of our days.

# POOR IN SPIRIT

*What You Find at the End of Your Rope*

Loneliness and the feeling of being unwanted  
is the most terrible poverty.

MOTHER TERESA

• • •

Blessed are the poor in spirit,  
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

MATTHEW 5:3

• • •

You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope.  
With less of you there is more of God and his rule.

MATTHEW 5:3, MSG

• • •

When darkness is our only friend  
You are there  
And we're longing for the hope of man  
You will, you will, you will make a way.  
"YOU WILL MAKE A WAY (POOR IN SPIRIT),"  
ALL SONS AND DAUGHTERS AND STU G

**MY MID-LIFE CRISIS** began with the best of intentions. I wanted to make a difference, to take on some of the injustice in the world, to do something really *good* with my life. I just wanted to change the world for one or two people, that was all. That's how it all started. But it ended up nearly costing me everything.

I felt like I kind of used to be someone. I was part of a band that toured the world. We wrote songs for churches to sing, and we wrote songs for everyone else, too. Some even made it onto the charts. We had a passion and vision for big music that made a big sound for one big, united world, and we were going somewhere. Those were amazing years.

For the longest time our band was on an upward trajectory. We had a special “something”—some kind of prophetic imagination between us that doesn't happen very often. While not everything we did was a major success, our influence and audience were growing. The music business was still selling CDs in the '90s, so we were able to keep advancing and climbing by owning everything ourselves, employing a staff that felt like family, and building our own delivery systems. When we needed help, we partnered with others who were bigger and stronger. We liked those words, *bigger* and *stronger*.

For a time, we felt invincible.

I never really knew what poverty looked or felt like. Even though I came from a working-class background, my family was far from being poor. We had food on the table, a roof over our heads, and loving parents who stayed together and worked hard. Sometimes some of my friends had the fancy electric racing-car kit while I had the cheaper, gravity-controlled Matchbox set,



but I didn't want for anything in terms of love and holidays and laughter. It was picture-postcard stuff, and it made me happy.

I left school as soon as I could. At sixteen years old I followed my dad into a manual trade, starting an apprenticeship with the Eastern Electricity Board. I thought I would be an electrician until the day I retired. I thought I had my career taken care of. Funny how these days, the very thought of having the same job, the same colleagues, and the same routine each and every day leaves me feeling nervous. But those were different days back then. Lots of people—myself included—were still hiding within the dream that the world was neat, predictable, and unchanging.

I got my wake-up call in September 1979 at Parrot Records in Ipswich. I was still sixteen, just a month into my apprenticeship, feeling like a man with something to strut about. I was starting to like the feeling of having a little cash in my back pocket, and I'd walk around the streets of Ipswich wearing my mohair sweater and Doc Martens.

And then, in that record store, I heard Queen's album *Live Killers* for the first time. It changed my life. Literally.

I had been a Queen fan for years. Ever since I saw them perform "Killer Queen" on *Top of the Pops*. There was just something about Freddie's voice and Brian's guitar orchestra that grabbed me in the gut.

But that day in Parrot Records, from the opening bars of "We Will Rock You," I knew that I wasn't just a fan. This was what I wanted to do. I didn't just like Brian May—I wanted to *be* Brian May.

So I went home, picked up my sister's nylon-strung classical guitar, and learned to play the Queen song "I'm in Love with My Car" by ear. I sold my drum kit that I had started to learn beats

on, and I bought my first electric guitar. My black-walled bedroom became my rehearsal room and my concert arena all in one.

My fingers bled.

At twenty years old I married Karen, a bank clerk whom—I admit—I would whistle at as she walked past the building site I was working on as an electrician. Three years later we moved to London to pursue music. I was in a few bands, played a few sessions, and started working for my church as a musician and song leader. Karen and I had our first daughter, Kaitlyn, on a dark, rainy November night at Archway hospital in North London.

Somewhere along the way I met Tim Jupp and a young Martin Smith. I was drawn toward what they were doing on the south coast of England like a grain of space dust is drawn to a black hole. I found a home for my music there in Rustington, West Sussex, and together as a young family—we had our second daughter, Eden, on a bright spring day at Chichester hospital—we found a place to be and to grow.

Full of passion, vision, naiveté, and the Spirit, our band at The Cutting Edge events, and the cassette tapes we produced, paved the way for what became Delirious?

So we found ourselves travelling the world and sharing our music with millions of people in some really wonderful and interesting places.

And I remember Brazil.

We saw Jesus in Rio. Well, we *went* to see the statue, but I only saw his feet, as the rest of him was shrouded in mist. Then there was the Copacabana beach, samba dancing in São Paulo, sampling *picanha* in Brasília. We stayed in great hotels and saw everything the tourist office of Brazil wanted us to.

But then we saw the favelas—the slums that everybody

associates with Brazil. Filthy kids fighting for tiny scraps of food among the trash. Drugged and deformed beggars lining the streets. A dead man lying faceup in the middle of the road, his eyes staring heavenwards.

I didn't feel safe there. But the danger wasn't external—it was internal. This five-star musician lifestyle just didn't seem to fit with what I was seeing, let alone what I was singing.

I felt challenged and extremely uncomfortable. The sort of uncomfortable you feel when you're in a skid and about to crash into a tree—you're not in control and you know what's about to happen. Up until now, being a Christian had been about waiting for God to show up at the gig and not getting in the way as the "power flowed." But now to watch from the stage wasn't enough. I was learning the story that's always been true: the story of the God who hears the cries of the oppressed, those enslaved by lack of power and choices, and I felt the pull toward the unexpected—a new way of being. To join that story and *do something*.

So I went home and put an offer in on a better, bigger house, closer to the beach, with more rooms and a space for a studio in the garden.



I hated India when I landed there for the first time. I don't say that lightly—I really did hate it. Every sense was on edge, overwhelmed by the smell of sweat and cheap petrol engines, the sound of traffic and too many people shouting, the heat, the taste of poverty, the sight of so much chaos. So many people crowding, jostling, wanting to carry our bags even before we had gotten near the airport doors. Then outside, the beggars, the street

people all wanting something from the rich Westerners walking out with guitars in expensive-looking flight cases.

The air-conditioned car ride to the air-conditioned hotel was like being decompressed after a deep-sea dive. But it didn't make me feel any better. There were armed guards outside the hotel, but they didn't make me feel any safer. Were they meant to stop the outside world from getting in, or were they there to stop me from getting out?

Finally, alone in my hotel room, I stared at the mirror.

*What are you doing here?* I asked myself.

I called Karen. I felt like a kid suddenly pole-axed by homesickness while on a school trip. "I just wanna come home," I told her.

"Stu, just go and be you," she said. "Be kind to people, do your job, and then come home."

There's nobody like Karen for putting my head back on straight.

Next morning a few friends and I jumped in *tuk tuks* and explored the city of Hyderabad. What did I have to lose? It seemed somehow different in the sunlight. We walked out of our five-star dream and immediately noticed a pristinely and colorfully dressed woman outside the blue tarpaulin shack that was her home, sweeping the road with a few twigs.

We dodged in and out of the ridiculous traffic, accompanied by the auto-horn symphony, breathing in the two-stroke *tuk tuk* fumes. Watching the crazy theater of Hyderabad kick off in front of our eyes and ears was intense. A new sound, a bold image . . . every few seconds something else pulled my head towards it.

I was holding on for dear life. But what kind of life?

Later on that trip we played a concert in Mumbai and visited a feeding program for kids of sex workers in the vast slums there. Millions live beneath the blue tarpaulin and rusty tin homes, straddling open sewers, fighting for life against all odds. Those broken, beautiful people embedded themselves in my heart. Prostitutes and their kids, transvestites, and the folks giving their lives to serve these people in dire poverty—they all fused together within my mind, a crazed symphony of suffering and hope. So many of my fears, my prejudices, my stupidly simple answers, my Western privilege, and my easy, simple religion died there that day.

And I fell in love with India. I fell in love with it the way I fell in love with my wife when I saw her through the glass door, before she could see me, on our second date. I fell in love the way parents fall in love with the hazy, black-and-white image on the shiny bit of paper that the sonographer hands them in the darkened room. All that risk and all that hope. All that potential and all that chaos.

It sounds strange to me now, but I think I fell in love with India most of all because it was there that I finally saw God, in the very people I had never really noticed before. When I finally stopped and stared at the poor and the least, the weakest and the last, I saw his love and compassion in action.

And it was I who felt poor.

What was I supposed to do with all this? I was coming apart at the seams.

And when it became clear a few months later that the band was going to end, I may have been coping on the outside—but on the inside, I went into free fall.



If you want to see where God is, look at the Beatitudes.

Let's put ourselves on the hill that day. Jesus was looking at the very people he was talking about. And if you were going to go look for the "blessed" of the world, you wouldn't go looking there!

But embedded in these amazing words is the key to finding where God is closest to us: in the places we're least likely to look.

The other day, I came across this hard reality: Nearly half the world's population—2.7 billion people—live on less than \$2.50 a day. And 1.2 billion live in extreme poverty—less than \$1.25 a day.<sup>1</sup>

It's hard to believe, isn't it?

The vast and growing gap between rich and poor has been laid bare in a new Oxfam report showing that the sixty-two richest billionaires in the world own as much wealth as the poorer half of the world's population.<sup>2</sup>

When I read this, I feel sick to my stomach.

I spend more on a single cup of coffee than 1.2 billion people alive right now have to live on per day.

It's easy to imagine that more than half the people on the planet are not only poor but living with crushed spirits.

Trite language such as "You have the power to change your life" is so inappropriate for most of the planet. The gap between the mega-rich and the extremely poor is sickening and wrong.

It's almost like it's been designed to keep people in their place.

And yet how can I even comment on this, a guy who wishes he were a millionaire every day?

But I wrestle.

The thing is, once you've "seen," you just can't "un-see." It never leaves you, nor should it. It disrupts you for life.

Since the slums of India, the favelas of Brazil, the waste dumps of Cambodia . . . life has not been the same. A daily wrestle with very few answers.

And then there are those of us with money in the bank, stuff in our houses—and the suffocating darkness and depression of feeling empty and unsatisfied. A different poverty of spirit, but spirit crushing nevertheless. Matthew's Jesus makes sure these people are also included.

Let's make no mistake. Jesus announces first and foremost that if you are poor—whether materially or deep in your soul—and it has crushed your spirit, God is on your side. No requirements, nothing to attain. This is the situation right now. Whoever you are. Wherever you are.

We don't have to look very far. I've been privileged to travel, and I have seen the most amazing people in the direst circumstances, and observing their resilience and joy has changed me forever. But I can also walk a couple of miles from my house in one of the most desirable counties in America and find neighborhoods where if the schools didn't send the kids home with food for the weekend, they would go hungry.

Unbelievable.

Hard to see a blessing.

And it's nothing to be earned.

It's just what *is*.

God is on their side.

## ELISSA KIM

I met Elissa Kim through something called Q Commons, which is a local expression of Q Ideas, an organization formed by my friend Gabe Lyons. Q helps folks engage in conversations that are all too easy to shy away from.

At Q Commons, Elissa was talking about her work with Teach For America, and her story and her passion for her job and the low-income communities she works with really inspired me. I was able to get in touch with her and meet up over a coffee in East Nashville to go deeper into her story.

Elissa is one of four children born to South Korean immigrants living in Indiana. Both her parents came from incredibly poor families.

Rising from the ashes of World War II, her mother's father had made the journey down south to scrape around for work. But then the Korean War broke out, and the north/south border was created. He met and married his wife in the south but never saw any of his family in the north again.

None of Elissa's grandparents could read or write, but her father's parents decided that they would sacrifice everything they could to give him a basic education. So they worked and worked and sacrificed and pushed doors so their son could learn to read and write.

Well, he turned out to be quite the bright kid. After some exam success, he got himself into med school, and from there he joined the army as a medic.

Elissa says that without the sacrifice of her grandparents and the "miracle" of basic education, her father would have lacked choices and therefore opportunities. His parents could see that



education was the “key” needed to open doors to the choices they never had. He clearly had talent, but in the absence of the most basic education it wouldn’t have mattered.

Elissa’s parents had an arranged marriage, and it wasn’t too long before they emigrated to the States, where Elissa’s dad became a doctor. Then a couple of things happened that changed the Kim family’s course again. Elissa’s dad was in a serious car crash that all the cops and medics said he shouldn’t have survived, much less walked away from. He was so shaken up, he said, “I was saved for something.”

Later, he contracted lupus so serious that it put him on his deathbed. With friends gathered around and Elissa’s mum crying, the physicians came into the room and said there was nothing left they could do. They were trying to prepare Elissa’s mum to be a single mother taking care of four kids. How would they survive?

But weeks later, Elissa’s dad pulled through—and thought for a second time, *I’m intended for something*.

“So he started exploring what he should do,” Elissa says, “and he felt led to Kazakhstan first. And then he ended up opening free medical clinics in Uzbekistan, providing free medical care to the poor—and he did that for twenty years.”

So this guy who brings his family out of poverty—through the chance of a basic education—becomes a doctor, and then gives free medical care to the poorest of the poor using his own money, in another country, for twenty years. Unbelievable!

But that’s not the end of the story.

Elissa grew up in this household in Indiana that placed a high value on education, and there was never a question about whether the kids would go to college. Elissa got a full-ride

athletic scholarship to play tennis at Northwestern University in Illinois.

Her own story differed from her father's in that she didn't really lack privilege growing up—but once she made it to the university environment, she quickly realized how much the circumstances of birth dictate the opportunities that people get.

The university culture is highly pre-professional, and so it's a bunch of hypereducated, privileged kids who really do have the world in front of them. They know they are going to get a great education, they can choose to go to Wall Street, they can choose to go to law school, they can choose to start their own business. They can do whatever they want, and these were the things that the system valued. Elissa fell in that path and said, "Okay, I'm supposed to be a lawyer."

To her it was at least a recognized path, and maybe she'd figure out what she was supposed to do with her life later on. Elissa says,

In my junior year, a sorority sister of mine who was graduating got accepted into this program called Teach For America. I had never heard of it before. She was so excited about it—committing to teach for two years, working hard and making sure that kids in low-income communities get the kind of education they deserve. From the second that description rolled out of her mouth I was hooked. When senior year rolled around, I applied, got in, and said, "Okay, I'm gonna do this for two years and *then* go to law school."

Then of course what happened—which happens to just about everyone that joins Teach For America—is

that I walked in thinking I was gonna take one path . . . and then I met my kids, fell in love, became completely outraged by what I saw. I mean, I taught in the largest public high school in New Orleans, and I had kids who couldn't read. I couldn't believe it. These brilliant, brilliant kids, very talented. They clearly had the intellectual and cognitive chops to be able to do it, and the system had completely failed them. When you see that, your life changes. All I could see was my dad. Same level of talent. The only thing is that my dad got a couple lucky breaks and a couple of opportunities. So that set me on a totally different path.

I ended up teaching for three years, then getting recruited to New York to join the organization. I thought, *Well, maybe I could have an influence on the system.* For the last seventeen years, I've been leading the recruitment effort for Teach For America. My job is to find people like me to join and to do what I did, and over the last seventeen years, 50,000 people have joined TFA. The vast majority of those people have come in under my watch.<sup>3</sup>

So, time-out for a second. A man brings his family out of extreme poverty in one generation through the sacrifice of his parents and the "miracle" of a basic education, and he goes on to give himself back to the poorest of the poor. Then his daughter is so impacted by the lack of opportunity for the poor within the education system that she leaves the career ladder to help provide the kind of educational opportunities her dad got.

How extremely cool is that?

*Sounds great, you may be thinking. But I can't quit my job*

*and join Teach For America. I have to provide for myself, for my own family. Poverty is sad, but I'm not in a place to do anything about it.*

And sure, no one person or one way has the solution to the poverty in the world. But we all have a part to play. Society tells us, “If you’re smart and intelligent, you should only do this handful of things.” And we just go with the flow, doing what’s expected, feeling empty, lacking purpose. But recognizing our own poverty is the start of learning how to play our part.

During her time in New Orleans, Elissa had a student whose family was so poor that the only shirt he had was his school shirt. But when she visited this kid and his family—and all these kids and their families—or went to church with them or went out with them on the streets at Mardi Gras, she was struck by the joy they had in community and in one another. Elissa said, “It made me feel like maybe it was me that was impoverished. One can be rich in many different ways, and one can be poor in many different ways.”<sup>4</sup>

My friend and manager Tony Patoto and I were mulling over Jesus’ language of “poor in spirit” and how, though he is probably talking about the actual poor, his choice of words widens the arc. Life doesn’t always turn out like we expect it to. Sometimes we can have all our physical and material needs met, and yet we still experience a crushing of spirit, a lack or an absence—a different form of spiritual poverty.

## **SAM POLK**

In my last year on Wall Street my bonus was \$3.6 million—and I was angry because it wasn’t big enough. . . . I wanted

more money for exactly the same reason an alcoholic needs another drink: I was addicted.<sup>5</sup>

I stumbled across these words in the *New York Times* the other day—and Sam Polk had my attention! Through the wonders of the Internet I managed to get in touch with Sam, and I got to hear his whole story.

When Sam was growing up, his dad instilled in him the belief that money would solve all his problems. “Imagine what life will be like when I make a million dollars,” his dad would say.<sup>6</sup> And so when Sam walked onto the Wall Street trading floor for the first time, he knew what he wanted to do. The hectic rush of the floor promised the one thing he’d always wanted: to be *rich*.

Sam had come through Columbia University competitive and ambitious, but he was also regularly drinking, smoking pot, and using cocaine, Ritalin, and ecstasy. He got a prestigious internship—but he lied to do so. He didn’t want to miss out on this chance for a step up the ladder. His then-girlfriend dumped him three weeks into the internship. “I don’t like who you’ve become,” she said. Sam couldn’t blame her. He sought out help for his alcohol and drug use, and his counselor told him that his “abuse of drugs and alcohol was a symptom of . . . a ‘spiritual malady.’”<sup>7</sup>

After his final year at Columbia, he got a job with Bank of America. With a year of sobriety under his belt, he was sharp, clear-eyed, and hardworking. At the end of that first year, he received a bonus of tens of thousands of dollars. Sam was thrilled—but jealous of a friend who was hired away by Credit Suisse First Boston for almost a million.

And so Sam worked even harder, climbing the Wall Street ladder. He became a bond and credit default swap trader, and just four years later, Citibank offered him a job worth millions.

But he was still nagged by envy: “When the guy next to you makes \$10 million, \$1 million or \$2 million doesn’t look so sweet.”<sup>8</sup>

And then he began to notice something. The folks he worked with on Wall Street were afraid of losing their money, and they would do anything to protect their bonuses, despising anything or anyone that would get in their way. It was like watching a drug addict desperate for the next fix. “For the first time,” Sam wrote in the *New York Times*, “I was embarrassed for them, and for me. I made in a single year more than my mom made her whole life. . . . Not only was I not helping to fix any problems in the world, but I was profiting from them.”<sup>9</sup>

Sam decided to leave Wall Street, but it was incredibly hard. He was petrified of losing his money. And then his bosses said they’d raise his bonus, but only if he stayed several more years.

But Sam walked away.

“I think I was a good person,” Sam says. “I was clearly doing something that wasn’t contributing to the world in a really good way, but when I hear folks talk about people on Wall Street, they think they’re all criminals. They’re not all criminals. They’re just normal, working people—but I do think that they and I were basically standing in the wrong place. The circle of compassion was very small.”<sup>10</sup>

In the time since he left, Sam’s gotten married, spoken in jails and juvenile detention centres about getting sober, taught a writing class for girls in the foster system, and started a non-profit called Groceryships, which is a brilliant work helping the

poorest of families put healthy food on the table. And he's also partnered in a new start-up business venture called Everytable, which is dedicated to making nutritious meals available in "food deserts"—communities who lack access to healthy foods and experience high rates of obesity, diabetes, and stress—at affordable prices.

This is what really compelled me to want to tell Sam's story in the first place. The obvious change of direction, realizing his own poverty of spirit, transforming his story into one that is helping others.

I asked Sam what "poor in spirit" means to him, and he told me about a recent conversation he had with a friend who had left his own hedge fund job. The man told Sam, "I realized a lot of money just makes you comfortably miserable."

Sam thinks that is exactly what poverty of spirit looks like to the mega-rich. He believes that there's a sickness on Wall Street. Not that these people are evil, but that they're living with an emptiness, a missing connection to something that's greater than themselves, whether it's God or humanity or a purpose.

And *in* that emptiness, *in* that lack of connection . . . God announces that he is on our side.

## THE GIFT

My appointment was for 10:00, but I was there at 9:45. I always like to be early. The therapist worked from an office out the back of a charity store, so I was able to pretend to check things out for a while before the session started. I disguised myself behind shelves of ethically sourced coffee and waited. When 10:00 came around, the door at the back of the shop opened and I watched

as it released two people: The woman looked a little like my sister, while the man was a short, stout Londoner. The woman left, and the man joked around with the other woman working on the cash register. He seemed different from a lot of people I knew at the time. He seemed happy.

So this was Phil, my therapist. We'd not met before. I'd met other therapists in my life, but never for professional reasons. Maybe that's why I was feeling nervous. I checked my bag again. It was always with me, and I knew exactly what was in it: a notebook, a novel, gum, hand sanitizer, lip balm, a phone, cigarettes. (I'd taken to smoking but didn't realize it was because it helped me stop and breathe deeply for a moment. I could have done that without tobacco, but there you are.) Checking my bag made me feel better.

It occurred to me that I might look like a potential thief, hiding out behind the shelves while at the same time searching through my bag, so I decided to check out some of the other products that the shop sold. I was genuinely taken with a nice little French press when I noticed someone was standing next to me.

"Ello, mate," said Phil. "Fancy a coffee, then?"

I mumbled something and followed him back to his room.

No windows to the outside world. Three chairs. Tissues in a box on a low table to the side.

I opened my bag as he made the coffee. I had some notes already made—mainly about what I thought my problems were and how it would be good if Phil could just help me fix them up. He smiled as I talked him through it all.

"I just want to make everything better," I said.

"Everything?"



“Y-es,” I said, slowly, trying to work out whether it was a trick question.

“Okay. Let’s talk about your bag, Stu.”

It turned out that Phil wasn’t talking about my actual bag. He was talking about my baggage. In the minutes—and the weeks—that followed, he showed me that while I thought I had a neat little list of issues I needed to work through, what I really had was a bag full of spiritual and emotional troubles that I had been carrying around with me for far too long. They were heavy, and I was tired from all that lifting. Slowly—very slowly—Phil showed me how to lessen the burden.

See, most people have two identities. There’s the false self, whom you put on show and update your Twitter and Facebook accounts with, and then there’s the true self—the one who stays mostly hidden in the shadows, hiding back there with your secrets and stories that you really don’t want to put on show. Keeping the false self apart from the true self takes a lot of effort, and when one of them starts to crumble, the other one struggles as well.

I had two selves. I was Stu G the guitarist, songwriter, and professional Christian. And then I was Stuart Garrard, the ginger kid from Suffolk. Trouble was, even though he was a professional Christian, Stu G was the false self. And he was falling apart.

I had been aching for so long. Being Stu G meant wearing an “I’m okay” mask for so much of the time. It meant feeling desperate and feeling scared, and it left me clinging to some relationships in ways that were not at all helpful for anyone involved. It meant life was all messed up, and my neat little

list of issues that I'd scribbled on a single page of my notebook didn't come anywhere near describing the damage.

That first session ended with me taking what felt like the deepest breath I'd ever taken—the sort that threatens to burst your lungs wide open. But they didn't burst. They held firm. And then came the exhale. All that stale air, the stuff that no longer gave me life, blown out from my body, making room for new life, for fresh air.

“Failure's a gift,” said Phil as the final minute counted down. “When you can't fix it, you don't need to fix it.”

I left, walking past the coffee and the nice-looking French press, got outside, and breathed again.



I've met so many people like me. So many of us whose lives are tangled up, so many who are recovering but still limping. So many of us who aren't among the world's poorest, like Elissa's family, or the world's richest, like Sam—and yet we feel as though we're scraping out an existence just to stay alive. So many of us who are carrying so much spiritual and emotional baggage that our bones are bent with the weight. So many of us who have forgotten what it feels like to breathe freely or to just be ourselves. Or to be happy.

And while our symptoms and our causes are as unique as the freckles on our skin, we're all united by one simple word: *poverty*. We're all poor. None of us can make it on our own.

And it is precisely at this point—the one where we begin to feel the rope slipping too fast from our hands, its coarse fibers burning our soft flesh—that we are handed the gift of failure. And there we find God.

As I walked back past the shelves of ethical coffee week after week, gradually it dawned on me that the God I was struggling to follow was not angry or disappointed or distant. Somehow, I had this living, vibrating, visceral sense that God was with me—despite (or was it because of?) the fact that I was poor in spirit.

God is on the side of everybody for whom there's no reason why God should be on their side. Sometimes we have to ask the seemingly unanswerable questions before we can be ready for the answers. And right there in the middle of the world's most famous sermon ever is the key to making sense of life.

Not just first-century Palestine life either. This twenty-first-century life, with all its collisions and chaos, all its hypocrisy and hope, all its poverty and potential.

You are blessed when you are

- poor,
- poor in spirit,
- spiritually bankrupt,
- pathetic,
- bedraggled,
- confused,
- morally empty,
- believing the lie that there's nothing good left within you.

Because the God who is reordering, remaking, restoring, and reshaping the world is with you.

God is on your side.

