

Note: This is the first chapter from *Ready Fire! Aim* by Mark Varughese, edited by Ken Walker. Released October 26, 2020 by Dream Releaser Publishing.

CHAPTER 1

God Can Use You While He Changes You

An adventure – I had asked for it and now I had it. In the spring of 2006, during those first few months after I had left the familiar environs of Australia for Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, I would periodically pause and reflect, ‘What was I thinking? What made me believe I could do this?’ Too many people mistakenly believe that a decision to follow God automatically produces flashing lights, cheering masses, and choirs in the background singing the Hallelujah Chorus. What I found was a struggle worthy of an Ultimate Fighting Championship bout. Feelings of being unworthy or incapable of the task of building and leading a new church regularly knocked me to the canvas.

One day, though, God used a rather innocuous incident to teach me a lesson I will never forget. I was staying on the tenth floor of my apartment building, with a shampoo bottle resting on a raised ledge near the open bathroom window. Carelessly trying to grab it in the middle of taking a shower, I accidentally knocked the bottle over the ledge. Then I winced as I heard it go into freefall and careen ten floors to its premature demise on the sidewalk below. I was a bit annoyed that I had wasted a half-full bottle of shampoo (after all, money was tight), yet not overly disturbed. I finished my shower, towelled myself dry, and dressed before stepping out into the living room to continue with my day.

But, as soon as I sat down on my couch, I heard a still, small voice within, saying, ‘*Go and pick up that shampoo bottle*’. (I knew it was the Lord, because I wasn’t married at the time.) Knowing that I wouldn’t feel at peace until I listened, I grudgingly got up, rode the lift down to the ground floor, and walked outside to where I assumed the bottle would have fallen. Searching through the shrubs, I finally found the shampoo bottle. It was cracked, misshapen, and caked with soil and dirt.

In obedience, I picked it up and was about to throw it in a nearby trash bin, thinking this was simply God convicting me of littering. Suddenly, I heard the same voice again, saying, ‘*Don’t! Take it upstairs, clean it up, and use it again!*’ I remember being semi-shocked that the Lord had spoken to me so clearly about something as mundane as a shampoo bottle, but I listened.

When I reached the bathroom in my apartment, I washed all the dirt off the bottle and set it back in a more secure resting place. Suddenly, I felt overwhelmed when that voice spoke again, ‘*Son, that’s what I’ve done with you*’. No matter who we are, where we live, or what our age, background, or social standing, we are all like that shampoo bottle – fallen. Yet, God came from

a high place, down to where we were at ground floor, picked us up, washed us clean, and set us back in our rightful place.

The best part of this episode was, for the next couple months I got great use out of the contents of that bottle. Despite its slightly irregular container, the shampoo inside still had cleansing abilities. We, too, have this ‘divine treasure’ in ‘earthen vessels’, and while the vessel is flawed, the treasure is pure. Ironically, the shampoo came out easier when the bottle had a crack in it than when I used to use the old pump mechanism that often displayed a mind of its own.

The ‘God in us’ often shines brighter and comes out easier through our brokenness than our giftedness. The idea that the contents of this bottle helped clean dirt from my head, even though the vessel was fallen and cracked, was the Lord’s gentle reminder to me that the earthen-ness of my flesh was not a barrier to the divineness of His presence. I saw that God could and would absolutely use me *while* He changed me.

Reaching New Heights

This spoke to me on a personal level, propelling me to a higher level of faith because it demonstrated in a practical way that God could empower me, guide me, and take me to new places. Because He had led me to this new adventure, He was more than capable of making sure I reached my destination.

However, the benefit of this lesson wasn’t just for me, personally. It helped develop me as a relatively new and often unsteady leader by giving me the grace and faith to take risks with other people. That was a crucial element in the first year of my journey in Malaysia, where I found myself needing to empower people I hardly knew. People who, in the world’s eyes, didn’t have the experience or gravitas to join me on this adventure. As our journey evolved over the last fourteen years, I would send some of these seemingly unqualified people to expand Kingdomcity into other nations, which more than once prompted questions from other people like, ‘Why are you sending them? They’re not ready’.

That didn’t matter. These were people who breathed in the atmosphere of embracing a risk-taking adventure and realised that they wanted in. They had quit their jobs, moved to other cities and nations, and showed giant-killing faith, just to see what God would do. What God showed me through this seemingly insignificant incident set a culture in motion which developed from that first year. For me, the only criteria were a willingness to be used and to remain teachable enough to be changed. The humble and hungry will always get my vote over the more educated, qualified, and honed, who lack those virtues.

This isn’t just a truth for pastors, ministry staff or church leaders. No matter what your occupation, talents, gifts or inclinations, God can use you. No matter what your past, your history, or what your journey has looked like thus far, there is *no sin* that God cannot forgive, no situation God cannot redeem, and no person God cannot restore. If we will repent, make a heartfelt decision to follow God and surrender our brokenness to Him, He will use us despite our limitations.

This is great news! You and I will always be earthen and flawed, but that's no surprise to God. He has known this all along and He has a history of using, as 1 Corinthians 1:27 puts it, 'the foolish things of the world to shame the wise'. Paul's encouragement echoes what the prophet Joel wrote a thousand years before, 'Let the weak say, "I am strong"' (Joel 3:10 NKJV). Or, as the familiar chorus 'Give Thanks', says, 'Let the poor say, "I am rich"'.

Contradictions and Inconsistencies

This contradiction of God using you while you wrestle with the inconsistencies of flesh and spirit and the contrasting highs and lows of every season of life means that following God will never be boring or predictable. As I have discovered, life with the Lord is always an adventure. Saying, 'Yes' to God invites you in to the mysterious, unpredictable and most rewarding life He can offer while you are on this earth. Sometimes, you will feel like you are walking on water and, other times, you will feel like you are drowning.

'Walking on water' can mean a lot of things. The words risky, rash, bold, brave, stupid, crazy, or courageous, come to mind, but one thing it's definitely not, is boring. Anyone who says their faith is boring, is following someone other than the God I know. Jesus took great risks with people and the reason He could was that He knew He could make any necessary adjustments along the way.

Take, for example, the mission trip that took place in Luke 9 – one we would have considered a failure because of the issues that came up. This lengthy chapter begins with Jesus sending out His twelve disciples after giving them power and authority over demons and to cure diseases, telling them to preach about the kingdom of God and heal the sick. What happens? They couldn't heal a boy tormented by demons, they launched into a petty argument over who is the greatest, they had exclusivity issues (sectarianism), and they also wanted to call down fire to destroy a village.

Lack of authority, too much ego, wrong doctrine and judgmental hearts – right then, I would have definitely called an end to mission trips and subjected everyone to intensive learning and unlearning. Yet, after ending with a lesson about those who proclaim devotion to Him but always find excuses for their inability to act on it, Luke 10 starts with, 'After this, *the Lord appointed seventy others*, and sent them two by two before His face into every city and place where He Himself was about to go' (Luke 10:1 NKJV, emphasis added).

It's as if Jesus thought that what we would call a disastrous mission trip in Luke 9 was indeed a success. In fact, it almost sounds like He thought the recruitment process was going too slowly, so he appointed seventy more people! However, to think that is to miss what took place throughout Luke 9, when Jesus changed them during the journey. He heals the boy, adjusts their hearts on greatness, rebukes them for wanting to call down fire, includes those they excluded, and then adds seventy more, immediately. What would seem irresponsibly risky to us is good for Jesus because He changed them as He used them.

So, what exactly are you worried about? Don't let your limitations hold you back from saying, 'Yes'. If we are willing to be changed, we should be willing to walk. God will guide you as you

step out and change you as He uses you. The treasure is divine – the vessel is earthen. This contrast ensures no one is mistaken about who gets the glory for every good thing that happens. This paradox in me never diminished my desire for God – in fact, it gave, and continues to give, this walk a great sense of adventure.

Growing up, I used to hold to a misguided perspective, namely, that God would change me until I was ‘worthy to be used’ as His vessel. Once He changed me, I would then do Him proud because I would be changed. If this is how it happens, most of us would be far too susceptible to pride, reasoning that *our* preparation is what qualified us.

When the all-knowing and gracious God chooses to use you for His glory *while at the same time* continuing to massage out the knots in your character and deal with wrong attitudes, our only appropriate response is humility and awe of God. We can’t take a shred of credit for what He is doing.

However, before I move further into the Kingdomcity story, let me return to how it all began.