

JOURNEY IN
THE
GREAT
DEPRESSION

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Journey in the Great Depression
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DEPRESSION

A FAMILY ADVENTURE

BY

J.B. LIFFLANDER

Dedication

Special thanks to my wife Carol, my sister Margaret, and my children, Anna-Grace, Jonathan, and Daniel for their help on this book. Most of all, thanks to my Savior (John 15:5).

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LEAVING HOME

The Matthews family had tried hard to keep the farm, but now it was lost. Each family member was sad as they packed to leave their small hometown in Oklahoma. Jim Matthews and his wife, Ann, had three children: Paul, who was fourteen; Mary, who was thirteen; and James, who was eight. All three children held back tears as they helped their parents pack their belongings and put them into their old car, to travel to where ever Jim might be able to find work.

Jim Matthews did not have a formal education, but he was an intelligent man, who had learned a lot by reading books on his own. He was also a man who understood the land – how to cultivate it and prepare it for planting; how to time his planting with the seasons, and how to take care of the crops once they were planted. And he knew soil. The topsoil was the fertile layer of soil which had the nutrients and minerals in it necessary for the plants to grow. Jim was a wheat farmer, and he could size up the topsoil by touching it, dampening it with a little water, and tasting it. He could tell you whether the soil was alkaline or acid by the taste, and what fertilizers were needed to enrich it to grow whatever crop was to be planted.

However, no man could grow good crops without topsoil, and the wind had come during what was called the Dust Bowl, and blown it away. First there had been the collapse of the banks, causing the Matthews to lose all of the money they

had in savings. Next the dust storms started, blowing through state after state in the Midwest, turning once-fertile farmland into parched and dusty plains which were, as the farmers began to say, “good for nothin.”

The old Ford creaked under the load of the Matthew’s possessions. Ann Matthews had prepared as much dried food as she could, but she was concerned it wouldn’t last very long. The whole family was waiting while she took a last look around the house. The bankers would have it soon, and auction it off to the highest bidders. She looked in the kitchen, and the memory of better days flashed through her mind. The nice turkey dinners at Thanksgiving; Paul looking so cute when he was just learning to cut up his food; James so pleased when he got his favorite vegetable, spinach, which the other children wouldn’t eat. She spied some grease above where the stove was – she thought she had cleaned it well enough, but...

Jim honked the horn, but Ann was preoccupied. She took a rag from under the sink and decided to try to wipe off the last trace of grease.

“Go in and see what is taking your mother so long, Paul,” Jim said.

“Sure Pa,” Paul answered, not really wanting to go back into the house, but quick to obey his father.

Walking in he saw his mother cleaning. For a moment the whole scene seemed surreal. Had they really lost their house to Eastern bankers, perhaps the same ones who had something to do with them losing their money in the bank, so they could not pay the mortgage? Was Ma really cleaning? Why in the world would she? His thoughts were interrupted as Ann looked up and saw him, and her eyes darted back and forth, in some way ashamed for having been caught.

“Ma, what are you doing?”

“Oh, Paul – well I saw this spot, and I didn’t want people to say that I was a bad housekeeper, I mean...silly, isn’t it?”

“I understand, Ma – it’s hard,” Paul answered with a consoling look.

“Yes, but...the Lord has told us we won’t be tested be-

yond what we are able, and I...”

Tears began to fall from her eyes, then she put the rag away, gently tucking it under the sink.

“I’m ready, son. Let’s go. This part of our lives is over now,” she said, walking swiftly from the kitchen and then running past Paul outside to the car, leaving him to shut the door. He walked to the car, thinking of how she had helped him so many times, cleaning up his scrapes and cuts, kissing him when he hurt himself, and praying for his healing, and always being willing to listen, even to his childish stories. But now he saw a new side to her – one he had never seen before. Her world was crumbling, and he knew she was trying to be strong, but her quiet desperation could not be hidden. Yet he also knew that although he was younger, losing the farm did not bother him as much as it did her. Perhaps now it was time for him to return some of those prayers. As he got into the old Ford, he whispered to God, “Please, Lord, give her the peace that passes all understanding – give it to our whole family.”

The car began rolling, moving slower than it ever had before, due to the heavy load. No one spoke as they reached the end of the long driveway which split the wheat fields, and came to a stop outside the gate. “Close the gate, Paul,” Mr. Matthews said.

“Why Pa, to protect it for those thieves who...”

“Don’t talk like that, son. Remember whom you serve. He is the One who said we should love our enemies, for He is kind to the unthankful and the evil.”

“Yes sir,” Paul replied, opening the car door. He had heard enough over the past year to know that they had been cheated out of their house – that the bankers had used crooked methods to foreclose on the farm. And he had a deep hatred for those men, even though he had never met them. He wondered how they could sleep at night, doing the things they did to other people. He also knew that he had to forgive them, but he didn’t want to. Getting back into the car, a Scripture came into his mind from the family Bible reading time, which seemed to explain it all, “For they do not sleep unless they have done evil; and their

sleep is taken away unless they make someone fall.” What was God telling him? Could it be that there were people that not only slept well after hurting others, but actually couldn’t sleep well unless they did?

Mary thought of her friends as the reality of leaving set in. Would she ever see them again? It seemed funny to her that even though she already missed them, it was her cat, Fluffy, whom she missed the most. She cried for almost a day after they gave her away, but at least they had found her a good home. The widow Mrs. Wilkins wanted a cat, and Fluffy seemed like just the one for her. Fluffy didn’t care a bit about going outside, and always liked to snuggle on Mary’s legs in the evening, especially in the winter when the wood stove was burning, and Ma was cooking. And, even though the food must have been tantalizing to Fluffy, she would only sniff, but never leave the comfort of Mary’s legs.

When they dropped Fluffy off, Mrs. Wilkins picked her up lovingly, and tried to pet her, but Fluffy was not interested. Mary wasn’t certain, but she thought that Fluffy had given her a look, as if to say, why are you deserting me? Oh, if she could only have talked to her, and told her the reason. Perhaps that was the hardest part – Fluffy thought she didn’t love her anymore. Just then she thought of a story that the pastor had told in church some time ago.

He said there was a man who didn’t understand why God just didn’t communicate with him if He really existed. The rest of his family believed, but the man didn’t, and one wintry, freezing Sunday night, his wife and children went off to church, leaving him as usual to sit and read. The question came into his mind again, and he put down his book and stared into the fireplace, watching its flames crackle and spark. If God exists, and if his son really is Jesus Christ, why can’t he just tell me? he wondered again. Looking into the fire, he said out loud, “God, who are you? Where are you? Are you real?”

Just then a little baby bird, freezing from the cold weather, chirped outside the window, looking for a warm place. The man wondered how the little bird had wandered from its nest,

and as he looked at it, it flew into the window pane, trying to get into the house. “That’s glass,” the man said, wondering as he spoke how he expected the little bird to hear or understand him. The bird fluttered around the window, and then hurled its little body against the glass again, and fell back, this time slightly bloodied. “You silly bird, you cannot come in that way. Here, come to the door and I will let you in,” the man said, walking over to a door close to the window and opening it.

The bird stayed near the window, not wanting to move away from the light. The man tried to signal it to come to the door, but the bird could not understand, and tried a third time to come through the invisible barrier, chirping weakly as it thrust its body against the glass. “You’re going to kill yourself!” the man exclaimed. Then, putting on his overcoat and boots, he walked outside towards the bird. As he approached, he spoke soothingly to the bird, trying to get it to come through the front door. But the bird misunderstood, and was afraid of the man.

“But I’m trying to help you,” the man said, reasoning with the bird. “You want to come in my nice warm house, and I want you to come in also, but you can’t come in just any old way. The glass may be clear but that window does not open, and you cannot get in that way. You must come through the door.” But the bird, although bruised and bleeding, managed to fly away, afraid of the man who sought to protect him.

The man came back into the house and sat down next to the fire, saddened. He knew the bird would die soon, but there was nothing he could do. “Imagine, he thought to himself, all I wanted to do was save that bird’s life, but he just couldn’t understand, I just couldn’t communicate with him...” Suddenly the man knew that God was revealing something to him – showing him why he could not communicate with God. He fell to his knees, and thanked God for showing him the reason. Then he asked God to forgive him for being so stubborn. Next he heard a creaking sound and he turned around, realizing that he had not completely shut the door. As he stood to close it, the little bird flew in, and fell down, barely breathing on the floor. “You made it, you came in!” he exclaimed. Walking over to the door to shut

it, he noticed on his way back that there was a Bible on the table that was open, and the wind had blown its pages. He looked down and read, from John 10:9, “I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture.”

Thinking of the story, Mary prayed, asking God to communicate to Fluffy that she still loved her. It was dusk now, and lights were coming on in the farmhouses that dotted each side of the highway. Mary wondered if the people who lived there were also worried about losing their farms. She also wondered why it was happening to her family, since they were Christians. A lot of the people who didn’t believe still had their places, and... then she remembered a Scripture from Matthew, where Jesus said, “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.” Were they suffering the way Jesus did? That seemed a little dramatic. And certainly things could be worse, she thought, as she remembered that a lot of women had been left with their children when the fathers went off for work and never came back. Pa had made a vow that he would never leave the family. “If we starve, we’ll starve together,” He said. She was happy about that; she couldn’t imagine what it would be like if he left.

Just then Pa slowed the old Ford down. It shimmied and shook a little as he turned off the road, into a campground. She remembered the newspaper sarcastically calling the campgrounds “hoovervilles” to mock the president, Herbert Hoover. He thought he could get them out of the Depression, but things weren’t going very well. She remembered the pictures she had seen of the makeshift camps with dirty children running around. She never expected that they would actually live in a hooverville, but maybe this was one.

They drove down some rutted roads, past other cars which were parked for the night. As the car slowed, she heard some people singing a hymn. The car stopped, and Jim looked back at the children. “Maybe this is a good place to stop, near where other Christians are,” he said. Then he backed up the car and pulled into an area under a large tree, not far from where the singing was coming. Mary could then hear the words being

sung:

“Be still, my soul, the Lord is on your side!
Bear patiently, the Cross of grief or pain;
Leave to thy God to order and provide
In every change, He faithful will remain.
Be still my soul, thy Best, thy heavenly Friend,
Through thorny ways leads to a joyful end.”

Stepping out of the car, they walked over to the tent. A pastor was leading the music, with a group of about ten adults and twelve children. The pastor waved them into the tent, and motioned for them to sing with them. As they sang, Mary closed her eyes and felt a deep joy in her heart, a deep peace, as if someone were saying to her that she had not a care in the world. For a moment, it was as if she were floating in the clouds somewhere. Then she saw Fluffy, all cuddled up on Widow Wilkins legs, and she knew her cat was happy. She smiled at the thought of that, and the feeling diminished as she opened her eyes and realized where she was. The hymn stopped and the man she thought was a pastor came over and talked with her father. Then he came over to the rest of the family and greeted them with a large, warm smile. Leaving, she joined Paul and James as they walked out, the cool night air hitting their faces.

“Did you feel what I felt?” she asked.

“I don’t know, what did you feel?” Paul asked.

“Yeah, what did you feel?” James chimed in.

“It was just like I was elevated to heaven for a moment, everything was so peaceful and...” She stopped, realizing that they did not know what she was talking about. “Never mind, I guess it was just for me,” she said slowly.

“Sounds good to me,” Paul said, looking around at the collection of rusty, beat-up cars parked around them. “I’d sure rather be in heaven than in this place.”

After that they pitched a canvas tent, and put their bed-rolls in it. Jim made a fire, and they ate the dried food Ann had prepared, along with some fresh fruit that was left.

“Well James,” Jim said, “You’re always asking me to go camping. I guess you’ll get your fill of it on this trip.”

“I’ll never get enough of camping!” James exclaimed.

“We’ll see about that,” Jim said, smiling. “Let’s get to bed so we can start early. Might be able to get across the state border into Texas if we start soon enough.”

“Texas? Is that where we’re going?” Mary asked.

“Pa told you, honey,” Ann said, “we’re heading for California but we’ll stop if we can find work anywhere along the way.”

“So we don’t know where we are going?” Mary said, giggling but afraid.

“Maybe not,” Ann said, “But God does. We’ll just trust Him. Remember what we read in Bible reading this morning ‘Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths.’”

It was the middle of the night when Paul woke up. At first he didn’t know where he was. This wasn’t his bedroom, and...that’s right, they were in the tent. He could hear voices outside, two men speaking and perhaps a woman. Opening his eyes, he tried to concentrate to understand what they were saying.

“You little girly travelin’ all alone?” one man said.

“You know what that means you are, don’t you?” the second man said in a gruff voice. “That makes you a...”

“Don’t call her names,” the first man said in a higher, mocking voice. “She’s my new girlfriend!”

“Leave me alone,” the woman said.

“What’s the matter, don’t you want a boyfriend?” the first man said.

Paul was quiet as he watched his father sit up. “You hear that, Ann? Ann, Ann. Wake up!”

“Yes I hear it,” Ann responded, “I’ve been listening ever since those drunks drove into the camp, and it’s not our business.”