

the God who fights for you

R I C K
L A W R E N C E



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Chapter 1

The Names We Embrace Are the Names We Become

(*“Simon, Simon...”*)

“What’s your name?” Coraline asked the cat.

“Look, I’m Coraline. Okay?”

“Cats don’t have names,” it said.

“No?” said Coraline.

“No,” said the cat. “Now you people have names. That’s because you don’t know who you are. We know who we are, so we don’t need names.”

—FROM CORALINE BY NEIL GAIMAN

In the award-winning short film *Validation*, a nondescript man working at a nondescript parking-validation kiosk changes the whole world simply because he understands the profound impact of naming people well.¹ One by one, he greets the parade of lost

souls who trudge up to his kiosk with something true and beautiful about who they are. He studies them closely, sees them well, then quickly reflects what is extraordinary about each one. One is a girl with beautiful eyes, another surely has wisdom beyond her years, still another is far more talented than he's given credit for, and yet another is a natty dresser.

Each person arrives at the kiosk with a barely detectable pulse—all the life sucked out of them by a world that names them harshly. And each person leaves, moments later, like an inflated balloon, full of their own essence and daring to hope again. It's not long before city leaders, then world leaders, beg the man for private meetings, and his miraculous abilities are plastered across newspapers in every country. By describing people as they truly are, not as their interior voices accuse them, he breathes life into dead souls.

But not everyone is so receptive. The girl who takes the driver's license photos at the DMV refuses to open herself to the beautiful names he throws at her. And she's offended by his repeated transgressions of the DMV's central rule for license photos: "Absolutely no smiling." She simply won't believe anything—*anything*—true about herself. Her smile is locked away in a dark cell, and there is no key. She is the rock he crashes his boat into, over and over, until his soul is breached and he finally sinks into despair.

In the wake of this devastation he loses his own name—hopelessness overtakes him, and he heartily agrees with the cynical voices inside him that rail against the futile way he's lived his life. All of this renders him powerless to name others. The crowds that used to line up at his kiosk disappear, shrinking away from the man's glum new mantra: "This is probably as good as it's going to get for you." He wanders the city, lost and separated from his true identity.

Then, by a fluke, the man begins taking photos of tourists when

they ask—and he finds he can't restrain himself from naming their beautiful smiles, their obvious virtues, and their happy fortunes. He rediscovers his soul and begins carrying a camera with him everywhere, stopping to take photos of passersby, treating them as if they are royalty. He asks a ravaged woman, dour and confined to a wheelchair, what makes her happy. "My daughter's smile," she says, smiling for the first time in years. And he snaps her picture. "You have a beautiful smile," he names.

One day, when he's delivering an armful of film to be developed at a one-hour photo shop, he runs smack into the DMV girl of his dreams, the same one whose refusal to smile dismantled his soul. She is snapping passport photos for a long line of takers—and she is smiling and radiant. He watches as she names and validates the next person in line. And he is undone again—what could account for this impossible resurrection?

She sees him standing to the side, and rushes to greet him. He asks what has released her smile. And she shows him a photo of her mother, explaining that her mother hasn't smiled for years, since a devastating accident confined her to a wheelchair. In the photo, she is smiling. He knows the woman well, because he took that first picture of her smile. He looks up with tears in his eyes, and the girl is smiling. And the truth dawns on him. The mother's smile is the redemptive key to the girl's cell door. The girl's smile (and her true identity) walks out of the shadows into the light. Standing there, surrounded by the newly named, she pledges her love and lights his face with her radiance.

His naming in her life, like a rushing flood, has finally carved out a new tributary. She is reborn. And she returns the grace by naming the one who has named everyone.

This epic story of validation meshes well with a tipping-point

encounter between Jesus and Peter in Matthew 16. Jesus names us to redeem us, and, in turn, we name Him:

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, He was asking His disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus said to him, “Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it” (Matthew 16:13-18).

The message here is simple and profound:

*The names we embrace are the names we become,
therefore...*

*we desperately need to know the beauty locked up in our
true name.*

And this:

Jesus will name us as we name Him.

Can You Hear Me Now?

My full name is Richard Allen Lawrence, and even now as I type these three names I can hear my mom’s voice, far off but piercing the air, calling me home from my adventures as a boy. You and I know exactly what it means when our moms call us *by all three names*—we’ve done something big and bad. If we’re lucky, we remember what that big/bad thing is as we huff/puff toward home.

If we're unlucky, she will surprise us. One thing is sure, when we're children, our moms never treat our formal names casually—they use our full names to get our attention.

It's important to remember this as Jesus transitions from a class on “Servanthood 101” and turns to face Peter. It's a big moment—He needs His friend's full attention. It's time to use his formal name—Simon Barjona (or Simon, son of Jonah). Jesus wants him to understand: *I know who you are—I know everything about you. And it's time to pay attention to Me.*

Simon's formal name represents his history on earth—his parents, siblings, occupation, and accomplishments. And Jesus repeats his name twice, the same way He affectionately rebukes His good friend with this: “Martha, Martha...you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her” (Luke 10:41-42 NIV). With Martha, as with Peter in the upper room, Jesus repeats His friend's name twice to gently communicate: *“Do I have your attention now?”*

The man named Simon Barjona is a fisherman from Bethsaida, called “the fishers town,” situated on the northern tip of the Sea of Galilee in the land of Jesus' boyhood. He is the tough and driven owner of a small business at a time when most of the people around him work as slaves. Replace the bumbling, stumbling picture you have of him in your mind with the picture of a man rough and big and calloused and savvy—a man to contend with. A young Clint Eastwood or Harrison Ford or Chadwick Boseman. And on the day he meets Jesus he is, like most small-business owners, hard at work, oblivious to the man he will later die for.

That's when Jesus, pressed to the water's edge by the gathering crowd, jumps into one of two empty boats hauled up on the

shore—they are both owned by Simon. So Jesus, already presumptuous in His trespass, asks Simon to jump in with Him and push out into the water. The exhausted man has just finished another grueling all-nighter on the choppy sea, with nothing to show for his dirty, dangerous labor. He must finish washing and mending his nets before he can go home and sleep. The last thing he wants to do is get back in that boat and push out into the water. But he's caught up in the moment and by the crowds and by the invitation. And when Jesus is finished speaking He smiles at Simon and, like that guy you remember from high school who loved to perform "magic" tricks, He pulls something out of His hat: "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch" (Luke 5:4). It's not the more cautious "let down your nets" that rouses Simon's ire; it's the "for a catch" chutzpah. "Master, we worked hard all night and caught nothing, but I will do as You say and let down the nets" (5:5).

Humor this guy, get Him out of my stupid boat, go home.

It is the perfect, playful miracle. So many fish swarm into Simon's nets that he screams for the crew of the other boat to push out and help with the catch. The nets strain and the boats start to sink under their load. And what is Jesus doing as the fish pour into the boat? Scripture doesn't say, but I imagine His laughter booms and ricochets over the water as He stands, hands on hips, at the back of the boat. It's all play to Him. But it drops Simon to his knees like he's been shot. He is not a thinker; he's a man who does and does and does—decisive and forceful. So, while others are marveling at the Man's feat, Simon is groveling at His feet: "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!" (Luke 5:8 NKJV). It is the first recorded act of repentance in response to Jesus, and the first in a long string of firsts for Peter. He is...

- the first to be called by Jesus;
- the first to follow Jesus;
- the first to publicly name Jesus as Messiah;
- the first to be renamed by Jesus;
- the first (other than Jesus) to walk on water;
- the first to use violence to defend Jesus when he draws his sword in the garden of Gethsemane;
- the first to walk into Jesus' empty tomb;
- the first to reach Jesus on the shores of the Sea of Tiberias after His resurrection;
- the first to preach about Jesus in the public square; and
- the first to lead the church of Jesus Christ.

These “firsts” define a man used to winning and overcoming—quitting is anathema to him. And that’s why every time Jesus talks about His impending death, Simon is the one vigorously protesting. *“Jesus killed? Not on my watch.”* There’s that Clint Eastwood squint. After he names Jesus “the Messiah, the son of the living God” in front of the other disciples, Jesus immediately returns the favor and names him Petros (or Peter), “the rock”—it’s a Greek word never before used as a name. Soon after, he briefly earns another nickname—“Satan,” or the “adversary”—because Peter’s fixation on winning blinds him to Jesus’ mission and purpose. His moxie is the reason he’s chosen, and it’s the reason he’s about to be sifted.

It’s so important to remember the makeup of this man—otherwise, all that happens next is lost on us. “Simon Barjona” represents all the man has been; “Peter” represents all he truly is. One is the name of his first birth; the other is the name of his second birth.

Sitting Bull, Gideon, and a Boy Named Sue

Native Americans most closely resemble the ancient Jews in the way they name their children—they craft names to *project* more than to *reflect*. For example, Anaba means “she returns from battle,” Oneida means “eagerly awaited,” Chesmu means “gritty,” and Dyami means “soaring eagle.” The Jews are likewise. Jacob means “he who supplants,” and he did. Abram means “high father,” and he was. Sarah means “princess,” and she was. Gideon means “valiant warrior,” and he was. Yeshua means “Savior,” and, of course, He is.

In the Old Testament book of Hosea, naming is the central theme—it’s a parable for what Brennan Manning calls “the furious longing of God.”² When God commands the prophet to marry a prostitute named Gomer, He also tells Hosea to name two of his children as stand-in symbols of the curse He’s put upon all of wayward Israel—one is to be called Lo-ruhamah, which means “she has not obtained compassion,” and the other is to be called Lommi, which means “not my people.” Then, as a sign and symbol of the redemptive love that will unravel the dire offenses of a people who have rejected Him and played the harlot, God tells Hosea to rename his cursed children. The first becomes Ruhamah, or “she has obtained compassion,” and the second becomes Ammi, or “my people.” Born under a curse, reborn under a promise. This cycle is the deepest rhythm in Peter’s life, and in our own.

Most often, the people you know who’ve either changed their names or longed to do it are thirsty for a rebirth—a redemption that will help them escape their own private curse.

My wife, Beverly Rose, was named by her mother after her half sister Beverly. My wife’s grandmother had three children, then divorced their father. Before she remarried, the state sent all three to an orphanage because there was no food in the house when social

workers arrived to check on the children. Carmella, Bev's mother, was five at the time. After her mother married again, she and her new husband had two daughters of their own.

Carmella lived at that orphanage run by nuns until she was fourteen, when her mother called the nuns and demanded that Carmella get on a train that would bring her to the home that was never her home—that very day. Though she pleaded with the nuns, she was not allowed to go to her eighth-grade graduation party that night; instead, she boarded a train to meet a woman she'd not seen since she was a preschooler. Leaving the only home she knew through a veil of tears, Carmella arrived at her mother's home, feeling like a second-class child—a Cinderella expected to serve the family. She was told she was the “lucky one” because her stepfather had agreed to take her in.

This punishing class system haunted her the rest of her life. And that's why, when she gave birth to her second daughter, she named her Beverly as a kind of appeasement to the “gods” who were her half sisters, and she gave her the middle name Rose as an offering at the altar of her own mom. Beverly Rose, far from a projection of beauty, was her mom's futile way of bargaining with her half sisters and her mother for their love. And Bev, like Lo-ruhamah and Lo-ammi before her, has ever since longed to be free of that curse.

That's because the names we embrace are the names we become.

“Simon, Simon” is Jesus' way of cornering the man still veiled by the husk of the curse. Our given names may reflect something true about our first-birth identities, and they will certainly exert a kind of forming influence over our souls, but they are not the names that best describe who we really are. From my perspective, my wife has transcended the cursed genesis of her name—*Beverly* means

“beauty” to me. But, for her, the name still exerts a kind of insidious influence over her life, even to this day.

Those who know us well are *not* surprised to learn that we labored and wrestled and fretted over the names we chose for our two girls—Lucy and Emma. As with many of our decisions, we tortured our way to a final choice. In the end we named Lucy after the bold younger sister in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, and we named Emma after the headstrong Jane Austen heroine (and because we liked the sound of it). I think we did our best to thoughtfully project a redemptive identity for both our girls—they have grown into their names. But I’m certain that these are not the names that best describe them, because our perspective on their God-given identities is most often short-sighted.

The Johnny Cash song “A Boy Named Sue” (written by the poet Shel Silverstein) tells the brutal story of a father who inexplicably bestows a girl’s name upon his infant son, then disappears from his life. After years of hardship and struggle (the boy learns to use his fists and his wits to survive the abuse poured on him because of his name), he tracks down the father he has vowed to kill and spews his anger. The ensuing brawl ends with the son pointing a gun at his battered father. The bleeding and beaten man stares back at his son and, smiling, tells him that the world is a hard place, and he knew he’d need to toughen him up to survive it. He expects to die at the hands of his son, but argues that he should be thanked instead. The name, indeed, formed the boy—but formed him into what? A brawling, despondent, vengeful young man who moved from town to town all his life to escape the shadow of his shame. You have to wonder if the father would’ve been wiser to name the boy “Richard the Lion-Hearted” instead—but that wouldn’t pass muster as a country song. The point is that the father intended to

form his son by naming him; his cruelty was an intentional attempt to guarantee his son's survival.

The names we embrace are the names we become.

The forming power of naming is unmistakable and more saturating than we realize, and it's not hard to find examples. There are two elderly brothers in my church whose last names, for most of their lives, were literally Failure. For years they labored through life, burdened by the latent curse of their surname and sometimes unconsciously obeying its prophetic gravity. Late in life, after their wives had begged them for years to change their name, the men decided to research the origins of Failure and discovered it's an Americanized version of their original German surname—Fehler. When they formally adopted the German original as their last name, it's as if the sun rose over their landscape.

The names we embrace are the names we become.

Entering into Your Aragorn Moment

In J.R.R. Tolkien's epic conclusion to the Lord of the Rings saga, *The Return of the King*, the man who's spent his life as a shadowy ranger, the man who calls himself Strider, refuses to step into his true name—Aragorn, the king of Gondor. In Tolkien's imagined world of Middle Earth, a complex genealogical web has Aragorn as the next in an ancient lineage that has always formed a bulwark against the forces of evil. But he can't accept his true name because he is hobbled by the shame he feels over the one-time cowardice of his ancestors. He is living under a curse. So he has stubbornly held on to his identity as Strider because there are no expectations attached to it—as Strider, he can remain in the shadows, full of grand promise but isolated and neutered. He's afraid to step into his mythic identity and become what he was meant to be.

And that's when a wise old warrior arrives, in secret, to call him out. Strider is summoned to a tent where he sees a hooded figure, the elven Lord Elrond. Elrond hopes to convince the ranger to embrace his true identity, then rise up against the evil spreading across the land from the fortress of Lord Sauron. From behind his back Elrond produces the sheathed sword called Andúril—a legendary weapon wielded by the great kings of Gondor and formerly shattered in battle. Elven craftsmen have reforged the blade in secret. Elrond intends to confront Aragorn—to urge him to accept the sword and the responsibility that comes with it to fight against the forces of evil: “The man who can wield the power of this sword can summon to him an army more deadly than any that walks this earth... Put aside the Ranger—become who you were born to be.”³

Elrond's appeal works. When Strider leaves the tent he is Aragorn—he has, as Elrond has demanded, “put aside the Ranger.” He will go on to embrace the mantle of king and lead the forces of good to victory over Sauron and the forces of darkness. When is the pinpoint moment when the pendulum of history swings toward the good and away from the evil? It is, of course, when Elrond challenges Strider to step into his true name and identity—Aragorn.

Have you had your own Aragorn moment?

Has God ever answered this deepest-of-all question in your life?

You know your given name, but do you know the name of your rebirth?

In Revelation 2:17, Jesus, speaking to His disciples, says: “To him who overcomes, to him I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it.” Whatever's written on that stone, it's a name God has chosen for you, to project on

to you your mission and purpose in life, just as He chose Petros to supersede Simon.

My own “Aragorn moment” is seared in my heart—it is as grand and infused with import as that scene in *The Return of the King*, because the forces of darkness in my life were routed when it looked like they were about to win. It was early in my marriage. I was a featured speaker at a youth ministry conference—the last place I wanted to be at that moment in my life. The arguments that were typical of our early marriage relationship had entered into new territory—I wasn’t sure we could escape the cycle of wounding. We were both prisoners of our distorted identities; I believed there was a hollow place where my soul should’ve been and that belief was destroying the love we had for each other.

When I left our home for the conference, Bev’s icy silence had the smell of death to me. I could tell what had just happened between us was way beyond our typical patterns of recovery-and-forgiveness followed by a slow thaw. As I boarded the plane, I felt like I was standing in the queue for the electric chair; I’d have given anything for a hint of mercy. I arrived at the hotel and immediately found a quiet place to call her. She answered, heard my voice, and hung up. I did this repeatedly, like a man insane. Every abrupt end to my call was like a dagger jammed and twisted into my gut.

So I walked through the halls of the convention center with a soul dazed and bludgeoned, hoping no one would recognize me so I wouldn’t have to play the poser. I crept close to the walls—a man afraid to show himself. The voices inside were thick with accusation and criticism. I felt like throwing up.

It was during one of these wall-hugging journeys down a crowded hallway that I felt God beckoning me. If He had suddenly appeared before me I would not have been surprised—His

voice was so urgent and magnetic. I looked around for someplace to meet Him, and an unlocked door led me to a darkened, empty conference room. I somehow knew to pull out a legal pad to write down what He was about to say to me. I sat on the floor, with the pad on my lap, waiting. And then His voice came like a lightning bolt. I had to write fast just to keep up. I didn't even process what He said to me until after His voice fell silent—the transcription was all I could handle at first. And then, when I'd read it for the first time, it was as if paramedics had jolted me with those electrified paddles that kickstart your heart.

He did nothing to calm my fears or predict an easy reconciliation; instead, He described what was there in that hollow place where my soul was supposed to be, using a metaphorical name for me that is so deeply intimate, it still brings tears to my eyes as I type these words. Here's what I transcribed:

You're a quarterback. You see the field. You're squirming away from the rush to find space to release the ball. You never give up. You have courage in the face of ferocity—in fact, ferocity draws out your courage. You want to score even when the team is too far behind for it to matter. You love the thrill of creating a play in the huddle, under pressure, and spreading the ball around to everyone on the team. You have no greater feeling than throwing the ball hard to a spot and watching the receiver get to it without breaking stride. In fact, you love it most when the receiver is closely covered and it takes a perfect throw to get it to him. You have the same feeling when you throw a bomb and watch the receiver run under it, or when you tear away from the grasp of a defender, or when

you see and feel blood on your elbows or knees and feel alive because of it. You love to score right after the other team has scored, but you want to do it methodically, first down by first down, right down the field. You love fourth down! You want to win but are satisfied by fighting well.

The affect of this message to me—sitting alone on the floor of an empty conference room—was as if I'd been yanked out of the torrent. I cried and cried and cried until I couldn't cry anymore. At my most desperate hour, the Lord Jesus saved me by naming me, just as He did for Peter. With "Simon, Simon" He spoke to the man as he was, marking the moment before He intended to free him from his captivity to a false identity. With "Peter" He gave him a life vest he could cling to as the flood of his sifting carried him through the worst nights and days of his life. While "Rick" sums up my history, "Quarterback" sums up my nature: the truth about my heart and identity.

When I returned home, my wife stood a few feet from me and spoke from a thousand miles away—she asked for a separation: "I'd like you out of the house by tonight." I moved into the basement apartment of a coworker, and later the basement apartment of a friend. I spent the holidays apart from her, crying all the time as the husk of my false identity loosened under the assault of my sifting. I reminded myself of "Quarterback" as I lay down on the threshing floor and spread my arms wide—helpless to stop the pounding, holding on to Him like a shipwrecked man clings to the only piece of floating wreckage he can find.

And then, a few months later, in the middle of an appointment with our counselor, Carl, the husk finally fell away. One moment I was describing the emptiness that was "Rick" before my naming

experience at the conference, and the next I was bursting into uncontrollable, soul-shaking sobs as Carl bolted across the room to kneel in front of me, his face just inches from mine, his flashing eyes locked on mine: “Rick, your soul is full, and you are loved.” These words uncorked something primal in me. I rushed from the room ready to vomit up the bile that had simmered in my soul for a quarter century. I drove a few blocks away and parked by an empty field, where my sobs shook the car and I felt my first taste of freedom. I could barely walk after this experience. A few weeks later I moved back into our home and, like the parent of a newborn, started to get to know the truth about myself for the first time. And I discovered, like the man in *Validation*, that finding my own name gave me the foundation and courage to name others.

“Quarterback” is no mere affirmation—affirming words make us feel good about who we are, but naming reveals our true nature. We pay attention when Jesus calls us by our given name, cling to Him while we are being sifted, then embrace the name that is truly ours on the other side. This is exactly what Peter did.

Is it possible that we all have two names—the one our parents gave us and the one that Jesus calls us when He’s plotting His next adventure? Is it possible that He uses our formal name, as He did with Peter, to get our attention—to speak to our history, to prepare us for the sifting that will separate us from the husk of our false identity? Is it possible He wouldn’t mind if we asked Him who we really are? Because sifting will reveal us—the *me* that’s been broken and broken and broken until it almost can’t be found, and the *me* we have been since our good Father formed us in the womb. The “true name” He has chosen for each of us perfectly represents the *revealed me* that emerges through our sifting.

In my speaking ministry I often invite people to “ask the

question”—to find a place in our meeting room where they can feel alone, then to simply pursue God for an answer to the question Jesus first asked His disciples: “Who do you say I am?” I first coach them to take authority over their own voice and the voice of God’s enemy.⁴ I ask them to literally tell their own voice to be silent and to remind Satan and his demonic host that they have no freedom to speak. Then I invite them to ask the question and wait—to resist their fundamental impatience. Sometimes I ask them to open wide their arms as a physical expression of their openness to God’s voice. And I always ask them to write what they see or hear or sense.

In those sacred ten minutes, some come away with nothing—it’s not their time. And some come away with everything, and nothing is ever the same again. They are *found*, many for the first time in their lives. And afterward, I ask them to choose a discerning spiritual leader and show him or her what they’ve written—to ask for an honest reaction. I encourage them to start telling their close and trusted circle of friends what they now know about themselves. From the day I shared my naming experience with my friend Bob Krulish, he referenced it in every email (often closing with “Throw long!”) and in most conversations (“Way to quarterback that!”). This has had a profound impact on me—like bathing in the deepest truths about my soul.

The experience of asking God to reveal our second-birth name is a risky act of faith—we need a community of people who will confirm and undergird and even edit this experience for us. The community guarantees that the naming will be treated as sacred, commanding the same respect that we give to the birthing process. Author and pastor Walter Wangerin says there are, universally, two “creation” languages. The first is spoken by God, who “spoke everything into being” out of nothing at all. The second is

the language He first gave to Adam—the language of naming (Genesis 2). Names, says Wangerin, are not merely labels: “The thing named is brought into place so it can be known. A name establishes a person’s relationship with other named things. The naming action begins to declare the person’s purpose. And this naming is powerful, but also dangerous.”⁵

Naming truly *is* powerful and dangerous. Damning, accusing words or descriptions are, of course, not from God. Normal parents never describe the essence of their children with words that damn. Never. We already know what’s wrong with us—we know it very well. But we know very little about what’s right with us, the person God has said is “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalm 139:14). Maybe you already know whether God is pressing you to ask Him the question. It’s not a mark of immaturity if it’s not time, and it’s not a mark of maturity if it is. It’s God who knows your real name, and it’s God who will reveal it to you if He wants to. In Isaiah 43:1, He promises: “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are Mine!”

These are the sweetest words we’ll ever hear in life.

Beauty Will Rise

On May 21, 2008, Steven Curtis Chapman’s oldest son accidentally drove over his five-year-old sister in the driveway of their home, killing her instantly. Chapman, an award-winning singer/songwriter who lives every day in the public eye, was then forced to live out an intolerable grief in the spotlight.

Just a few days before the darkest day in their lives, the entire Chapman family was in China when a 7.9 magnitude earthquake dismantled the Sichuan province, a mountainous region in the western portion of the country. They were in the Shanghai airport

hundreds of miles away from the epicenter, headed home to celebrate Maria Sue Chapman's fifth birthday. Only five years before, China had been her home. She was one of three Chinese orphan girls adopted by the Chapmans. At the airport waiting for their flight, they didn't even feel the quake. But they personally knew many of those who now had to cope with the massive physical and personal destruction—they had spent four weeks in Sichuan province in support of an aid agency.

I'd heard the basic details of all of this, as did the millions around the world who respect Chapman and enjoy his music. And then, a year or so later, a pre-release CD of Chapman's new album landed on my desk. I get several of these every day because the magazine I've edited for decades runs music reviews. Something about this album's cover drilled into my soul. On it, Chapman is standing on the precipice of a deep gorge, arms raised, face caught up in ecstasy, with his guitar slung over his shoulder. At first I thought the background behind him was a mountain range. But when I looked closer I could see that it was actually a mountain of rubble. I read the liner notes and discovered Chapman was standing near a leveled village in the Chinese quake zone. He'd returned to China about a year after his daughter's death to minister to those who'd survived their own trauma, helping open an orphan care center named after Maria and offering a free concert to the grieving families of earthquake victims. The title of the album precisely matched the photo on its cover: *Beauty Will Rise*.

The photo is such a perfect metaphor for Chapman's sifting experience—plain evidence of the catastrophic in the background, the worship of the free in the foreground. I couldn't stop staring at this photo—even now it rivets me. Chapman's bold act of worship is just as jolting, just as contradictory, just as haunting, and just as

beautiful as the songs of grief on the album. How is it possible to worship God when the worst thing we can imagine happens to us?

“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are Mine!”

Maybe “the arrow that flies by day”⁶ will find its mark in us—maybe an innocent little girl will die on our driveway, maybe a heroic explorer will die a pauper. And maybe we’ll emerge from all of it with a ridiculous thirst to worship Jesus, because He’s named us and claimed us in the darkness of our sifting.

When I was growing up, the “name it and claim it” theology was all the rage—it thrived because it perfectly fit the unique narcissism of an American culture that treats prayer like a bank robber’s note to the teller. “Name it and claim it” has now largely been scorned to death—but not in the kingdom of heaven, where the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are delightedly working around the clock to name and claim all who will rejoin their family.