

I am a radical.

Many, if not most people, wonder why I am so passionate about my faith ... why I can't just go along to get along, be like other Christians who aren't so ... radical. Well, I can't. Even though there are times that I wish I could, I just can't.

Maybe it's because of the way it all started for me. There was a time when the whole idea of faith wasn't even a remote part of my life. Sunday mornings weren't about going to church; they were about recovering from Saturday night, or playing golf, or both. I believed there was a God somewhere, but I didn't know Him. He wasn't a part of my thinking or the way I lived my life. I lived for things I grew up believing were important: money and lots of it, friends, and being seen as successful. I wanted to be known as shrewd and tough, in charge, a man who could make things happen.

In my school years it was all about being an athlete, scoring touchdowns, making points, winning the conference, going to State, a scholarship, being popular, dating the most beautiful girls. When I left school it was about competing in business and climbing the ladder. The goals were basically the same—win and take no prisoners. The measure for success changed, yet the game was always the same. Compete, compare, be better than, have more than, be stronger, tougher, get farther than ....

I don't want to paint a totally dark picture of my growing-up years. While there certainly were bad times, there were a lot of good times as well. There was never any doubt in my mind that my mother and father loved me. They were actually wonderful people whose lives were caught up in the aftermath of World War II. And like many in their generation, they didn't handle their problems as well as they could have. But there was never a time that they didn't give me love and encouragement, even under difficult circumstances.

I grew up in the countryside of Crystal Lake, Illinois, in the 1940s and '50s. It was a wonderful time and place, with all kinds of sporting activities. I explored the hills and forests, hunted, fished, and played football and baseball with the kids in the neighborhood. My dad was always a supporter of my activities, and when I took up golf my mother used to caddy for me. She also kept score at every basketball game I played in. As an older brother, I had, and still have, a loving relationship with my brother and sister.

Nevertheless, when I look back—yes, there are some dark memories that I'll mention later in this book. But aside from that, I really loved my mom and dad. They did their very best. As I've grown older and have experienced problems and failure in my own life, I have realized how difficult it was for them in their lives.

By the age of 32 I was burned out. I was living in Italy, where I founded and ran a business. I had a big, beautiful villa (worth probably 2–3 million in today's dollars) in an exclusive gated village north of Rome, with the requisite Italian sports car—a Maserati—sitting in the driveway. I had already been President or CEO of three other businesses, earning an income that would have been in the top 1% in the world. By any standard, I had it all. I could have whatever money could buy and I bought it as fast as I could. My neighbors were some of the richest people on earth.

At a young age I had accomplished more than I ever dreamed. There was no more to get, and I knew it. It would only be more and I sensed that *more* wouldn't matter in any real way. Inside, I was empty and miserable. I was very angry and frustrated because somehow all I had worked for and accomplished still didn't work for me. I believed it would, and thought material success and recognition would bring happiness. It didn't.

In fact, the opposite was true. I had climbed the ladder of success, only to find that it was leaning against the wrong building. Worse yet, in my search for success I had deeply hurt others that I loved, as well as myself, and I couldn't take back the hurt. I was sick of the game and sick of myself. I thought, *If life is 30 more years of this—another relationship, a new business, a few points on the bottom line, new clothes, more jewelry, another whatever—I'm not interested.* I never considered giving up or ending my life, but I became cynical and negative to the point that no one wanted to be around me, especially when I had been drinking. In spite of all my success, life sucked.

I walked away from the business in Rome and started another with some friends in Denver, and then another in Los Angeles. I hoped a change of scenery would make a difference. It didn't. I truly didn't care about the new ventures; I simply threw money at them until I had no more to throw. I drank too much too often, and tried to make up for my discontent by acting out aggressively. Nothing helped. It only made the inner pain worse.

I don't believe that going into detail about all the things I did to try to fill the void would help this story. So I won't say more than this: Whatever you think it might have been, it was worse. People who know me today would never believe the things I did or the person that I was. To my knowledge I never killed anyone, but beyond that I have been guilty of the most sinful and obnoxious behavior you could imagine. Liar, cheater, thief, adulterer, drunkard ... yes, I was all of these and more. I used people and manipulated them to my benefit. To me, the only sin was being caught, and that didn't happen much.

Inside, in a quiet place I didn't go very often, I felt heartsick and lost. I knew it was wrong but I didn't know what to do or how to do it. I'm not proud of this time in my life ... in fact I'm very ashamed. But the truth is that even though I tried in some ways to be better, I was not a very nice person and I knew it.

Then came a day that for me was unlike any other. It was Sunday, November 18, 1973. My future wife, Bonnie, was on a trip visiting her mother in New Orleans. I got up late and when I turned on the TV to watch a football game, a church service came on instead. I had never watched a church service on TV before. I didn't go to church, nor did I think I had to. But when I heard the first few sentences of the pastor's sermon, I was riveted. I watched the entire program.

\*\*\*

Looking back, I knew the process had begun the day before, on Saturday. I was idling around the condominium pool that morning and happened to watch two men playing backgammon. One was a well-known comedian that I recognized, and the other, a short little guy with one arm, that I didn't know but had seen around the pool. I didn't know how to play the game so I sat and watched them from about 20 feet away. They laughed and cursed and seemed to be having a great time. When the game finished, the comedian got up and left. The short man caught my eye and waved me over. He was very direct with me.

"So what's your deal?" he asked. "Are you rich?"

"No, I'm not rich ... in fact I'm just about broke," I answered.

This was an unusual response, to say the least, because I never confided in anyone in those days. I always tried to put up a false front to look successful, even as I slid down the slope

towards bankruptcy. But without thinking, I opened up to this unusual stranger. He introduced himself as Teddy Brooks.

“That girl I see you with, are you married to her?” he asked.

“No. I’ve been married twice and they didn’t work out,” I said.

“Are you nuts? Can’t you see she loves you?” he said, looking me in the eye. “What’s your big problem?”

For some unknown reason I poured my heart out to this stranger. I told him of my frustration, the failure of all my success to bring happiness, and how I had gone from being a golden-haired boy with the “Midas Touch” to a cynical and sullen man who couldn’t get anything to work. Ted listened attentively and then said something I never imagined would come from a man I overheard swearing and cursing a few minutes before.

“You’re a bright young man, Buck, and you have a lot going for you. But you need God in your life.”

In spite of the unusual source, I knew his words touched me in a place I needed but never would have looked for, especially not by a swimming pool in Southern California.

“So, what should I do?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” he said, “but once when I was really down, a Jewish friend of mine told me to memorize three Psalms. I did and it seemed to help. Why don’t you try that?”

I didn’t know what he was talking about. “What are Psalms ... you mean like in the Bible?”

“Yes.” He paused and looked me in the eye. “Don’t you have a Bible?”

“No.” (I had never opened a Bible in my life.)

“Tell you what. I’ll loan you one somebody gave me. It’s in my apartment.”

We went up to his apartment and he handed me a blue softcover Bible. He told me I could keep it. I thanked him and took the elevator up to my apartment, somewhat dazed by what had just happened. In the elevator, I thought of my best friend, Bob Mack, who had tried to tell me something about God and Jesus a few years earlier.

Bob and I have been best friends since we were 12, and our lives have been knit together in many ways. We competed against one another in grade school and we became teammates in high school. Bob played fullback and I played halfback. He was guard and I was forward. We dated girls who were friends. He took over his family business within months of my being elected president of our family business.

*I should call Bob and ask him about God*, I thought. But I realized I wouldn't want Bob to know about my financial condition, or that I needed anything. I immediately dropped the idea.

The elevator dinged open, and I went into my apartment. Inside the living room I was shocked to find a book on the coffee table by the sofa—a book Bob sent me after the last time we had seen each other. I'd had too much to drink at dinner and forgot to take the book. It arrived a few days later in the mail. I was embarrassed about how I had acted and just put it aside.

In fact, I never even read a bit of it and had forgotten all about it. In the meantime I had moved from Cedar Rapids to Minneapolis, then to Rome, Denver, and then Los Angeles. I don't ever remember packing his book or even seeing it before that day. But there it was on the table. I picked it up and read the title: *The Art of Understanding Yourself – An Invitation to Wholeness – And to Life Itself!*, by Cecil Osborne.

That afternoon I read the three Psalms Ted had marked for me in the Bible, and then I decided to read Bob's book. I opened the flyleaf and saw that his wife, Holly, had written "God's peace be with you, Bucky. Love, Bob and Holly." I still have the book. The title of the first chapter was "Your Lonely Self." I had never thought of myself as lonely, but I was drawn into the book. I stayed up almost all night and finished it.

There was much in the book I didn't understand. Many of the concepts presented are very familiar to me today, but were foreign at the time. The overarching message was that somehow it was possible to have a relationship with God, and people, that would be loving, accepting, and healing. The book featured many testimonies of the positive effects of small groups of Christians who met together to talk through their experiences and learn about a God who is love.

In the little bit I knew about God, I had never considered Him to be interested in me personally—at least not until after I died, when He would be waiting to punish me for my sins. I

didn't have a problem believing I was a sinner who deserved to be punished ... that part was easy. If there was a God and He had anything like the Ten Commandments for rules, I was toast.

The book described forgiveness in a way I had never heard, and the people who shared their stories seemed a lot like me. They carried guilt and regret for things they'd done or what had happened to them. Many shared how performance-based acceptance had warped their lives and how they felt that no matter what they did, it was never good enough. Some said their guilt came from their church experience that was all about keeping the rules, or from the judgmental attitudes of others. I didn't identify with all of them, but plenty enough to get a sense that they had something I didn't, and that I needed what they had.

I thought a lot about Bob and Holly that night. I had seen a change in their lives after they became Christians. It was change for good and although I had always respected them and admired their marriage, it seemed to get even better after what they described as a "born-again experience." Of course I had no idea what that meant and I even made fun of them when they tried to explain it to me. When I finished reading, I thought this must be at least part of what they were trying to tell me.

I finished the book and went to sleep thinking that I needed to become a Christian, without knowing how or what it meant. Did I need to join a church? If so, which one? I had taken instruction in the Catholic Church years before, but nothing I studied prepared me for a personal relationship with God. It seemed to be a bunch of rules that didn't make sense, and most of the Catholic people I knew seemed to ignore them anyway. If the old priest who instructed me had ever tried to tell me about Jesus as my personal Savior, I didn't get it. I tried to keep the rules for a while, but quickly broke them. Eventually I became discouraged and gave up on religion altogether; but I didn't give up on God. I knew He was there and I knew He would judge me. I just had no clue that He loved me.

I went to sleep not fully realizing all that had taken place in the space of 18 hours—up until I switched on the TV to the church program instead of football. It was 10:00 AM. I sat back and listened.

\*\*\*

“Problems are an inevitable part of life,” said the speaker with a kind expression, as he paced back and forth on the stage. The cameras followed him closely. “No matter who you are—Christian or not—problems will always come and go. No one can avoid them or live a life without them. And if you try to deal with them in your own strength, sooner or later they will break you down.”

He had my attention. I had nothing but problems in my life: money problems, relational problems, health and lifestyle problems, career and direction problems. And most of all, purpose-for-living problems. Anxiety filled me whenever I thought about where to go or what to do with my life.

The pastor went on: “But I have good news for you today. God loves you and if you will give your life to Him in Jesus Christ, He will take responsibility for your life. And from then on, every problem will become an opportunity to see His love and power.”

He said a lot more, but that was the essence of his message as I remember it. He explained that Jesus had come to the earth in the form of a man and died for my sins. He actually took the punishment that I deserved upon Himself and, by doing so, made it possible for me to be forgiven and to have a new life ... to be born again. I had previously heard that Jesus died to take away the sins of the world, but that meant nothing to me personally. I still sinned, so I figured either I didn’t count, or grace hadn’t worked. But the speaker said it was a choice, a gift offered that must be accepted. He said the gift is offered to everyone, but not everyone takes it. I knew that I never had.

“And you can receive the gift of God’s love and forgiveness right now, wherever you are,” he said as the camera moved closer. “So if you’re watching this on television, you can get on your knees right in your home and give your life to God. You can receive His Son and His forgiveness and the new life He offers you.”

That was my answer! Without hesitation or embarrassment, I knelt down at the same coffee table where I found the book Bob had sent, and I prayed.

“Lord Jesus, if this is real and You want my life, You can have it and I will do whatever You want with the rest of it. Please forgive me, Jesus. I know that I am lost and have sinned. I am sorry, Lord, and I turn away from the life I have been living and give my life to You.”

As I prayed I began to cry. I cried even as I wrote this. I can't help it. It has been over 40 years and that moment is *still* so real to me. In my mind's eye I am back in that apartment, crying and confessing my sin. I can see in my spirit, myself lying at Jesus' feet, and can still hear the words: "Jesus is the best friend I will ever have." Were those real words? Where did they come from? I don't know, but over the years Jesus has proven them to me over and over and over again. Jesus *is* my friend as well as my Lord and my Savior. Yes, He is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords ... God in man ... all of that and more. That was the morning when I began to know He is my friend, my best-ever friend.

I cried for a while until it stopped, and then sat back on the couch. When the message was finished, the program ended, and I wondered, *What just happened?* I couldn't explain, understand, or put it in words; somehow I knew my life had changed forever.

But what comes next? What do I do now? I spent the day in a kind of questioning wonder. *Was it all real? What should I do?*

That afternoon I went down to the pool, but no one was there. I rested in the sun, wondering, *What did it mean? What do I do next?*

It didn't take long for Jesus to begin to show me.