

# Mend

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# All Planned Out

*Craig Elias*

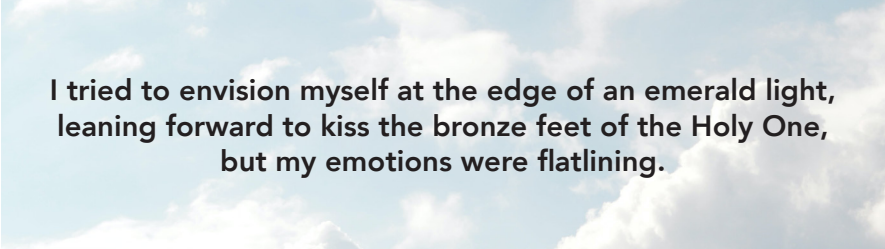
May 12th was a Friday night I had all planned out. First I'd go to the gym, link up with my buddy Paul, and have him fill me in on his week while we laid down a few thousand meters on the rowing machines. After that, I'd head back to the block and get cleaned up before watching LeBron and Steph go at it in Game 6 of the Western Conference Semis. I was hunched over, cinching the laces on my Reebok high tops, when the bubble guard's voice came whining over the intercom. "The gym is cloooooosed. Pass movement up. The gym....is...cloooooosed."

I sucked in a deep breath and exhaled through my nostrils. The announcement was clear but that didn't mean I trusted the announcer. Before I changed out of my threadbare workout sweats and dingy thermal top, I needed confirmation. Kneeling on the stool near the back of my cell, I craned my neck to peer through the sliver of Lucite that passed for a window. Sure enough, the sole activities staffer on duty that evening was posted near the yard gate with his clipboard, checking ID cards. Softball participants who'd already made it past the bouncer were on the pile of mitts behind the backstop like ants on a fallen Popsicle. No one was going into or out of the gymnasium. My plans were cooked.

With Paul and our faux row no longer in

meeting with God.

Before I pray I typically take a few minutes to contemplate what it is I'm about to do. Just like I wouldn't go in front of the Board of Pardons without first considering the magnitude of the situation, I try not to wander into the throne room of the King of the Universe like some accidental houseguest looking for a snack in the middle of the night. In order to get my mind right, I shut off the desk lamp, the televisions, and the Tivoli. Pacing back and forth from toilet to stool, I put a couple bars of "How Great Thou Art" into the air, reminding myself of all the worlds God's holy hands had made. When I ran out of stanzas I could remember, I placed my palm on the desk and poured myself like thickening oatmeal



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play, I stripped off my gear and donned my clean(er) cell sweats. I grabbed the empty mug with the Nescafé logo from my cabinet, gathered a handful of letters I'd written that morning, slapped the door-opening silver call button, and trotted down the staircase to the dayroom. The officer at the desk autographed my postage slips, and I deposited the mail in the box. I filled my mug with fountain water, returned the way I had come, and locked myself in. Since my cellie was out scouting the softball game, I figured this was as good a time as any for a business

toward the floor.

On my knees I felt stiff and old, a rusted-out Tin Man in serious need of oil. It hadn't been that many years ago that I could do up-downs under the August sun until Coach Herschl got sick of blowing his whistle. Now I couldn't make it to the ground once without performing a symphony of middle-aged-man noises. I closed my eyes, touched my forehead to the concrete, and noticed the coolness against my skin. I tried to envision myself at the edge of an emerald light, leaning forward to kiss the bronze feet of the

Holy One, but my emotions were flatlining. I wanted my heart to match my posture but couldn't get myself unstuck from the work-out that wasn't.

*C'mon, Craig. This is the God who gave his all for you. Focus.*

I decided to stretch out in the skinny space between the cabinets and the bunk. From child's pose, I extended my legs and began to lower my torso to the floor. That's when it happened.

*Phffff.*

I let one slip.

Trying to ignore what I'd done, I flatlined myself out and launched into a spiel I hoped would help me reach into eternity. "Heavenly Father, You are the Creator of all things, the One who spread out the sky and who filled the oceans and who crumpled the mountains..."

But the residue of my creation hung blue in the air.

*I fooled at God's feet.* As the image took hold I began to smile, sheepishly at first, like when my four-year-old nephew ate something he was not sure he should've eaten, then broadly, like when he realized the adults didn't care. The smile begat a snicker, and the snicker turned into a laugh, full and from the gut. With me alone in the dimness, there was nothing to stop it. Chortles bounced off the ceiling and found me again on the floor, making more. Then a still, small voice cut unexpectedly through the noise. "God's laughing, too."

Once, the prophet Isaiah wrote about beholding a vision of YHWH so pure and true it reduced him to a puddle. "Woe is me," Isaiah said. "I am destroyed, for my lips are contaminated by sin, and I live among

people whose lips are contaminated by sin." I'd read that account a number of times and I understood his point. A direct encounter with the Living God has a way of putting a person in their place—sort of like what happens when a lifelong city dweller gets their first clean view of the stars. There's a transformative sense of incomprehension, a feeling of shrinking. I'd understood the concept of awe, but I hadn't *known* it. Not like this.

In that moment—with my cranky, farty body prostrate on the floor of Delta Bravo Fifty-five—thoughts drumrolled through my mind. *I'm not strong. I'm not smart. I'm not big. I'm not good. I'm not able. You are.* I was leveled by my own finiteness and impotence. Never had I been so human. And never had YHWH been so God.

The laughs turned into sobs as I felt something of his presence near me. I squeezed my eyelids tighter and wanted to burrow into the cement, to get lower than low. A mild electrical current zipped through my extremities. The second wave made the hairs on my forearms salute.

"I'm such a mess," I said.

"I know," the Holy Whisper replied, "I made you."

This was more than a statement of fact, more than a theological truth. These were words of acceptance, the sorts of words every son has wanted to hear from every father since time began. They were comfort, like a mother's lips on a skinned knee. They were belonging, like arriving at Sitoo's house and being hugged with one arm and pointed to the Crock-Pot of simmering grape leaves with the other. Most of all, they were understanding. The words whipped me from Earth to the heavens. In a flash, I was in my

Father's arms. Despite my every flaw and limitation, I was God's and God was mine, and that was just the way he wanted it.

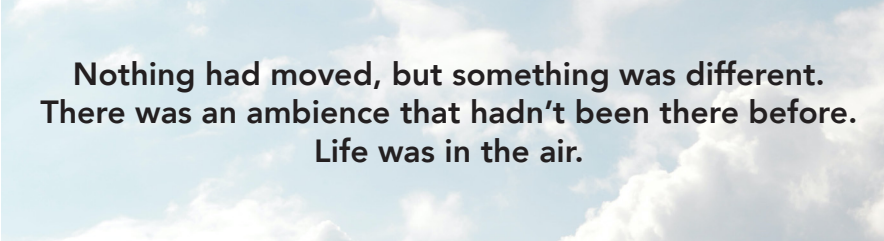
Lying there, I was enveloped by a sense of well-being that I'd felt this deeply only once before. It had happened eight years ago, after I'd preached publicly for the first time. That morning, I had been a square peg in the squarest of holes. The discovery of my God-ordained purpose felt sublime.

This feeling was the same, yet the situation made it different. The sensation in the first instance had been attached to something I'd done, or at least something that had been done through me. This time the irresistible connection I was experiencing wasn't rooted

Praying can be like dreaming. A sprint. A stop. A jump. A detour. A silence. A knowing. A connection between the pray-er and the prayee only they can comprehend. I'm worried that reading a description of it might be like watching a badly edited student film. Nevertheless, I'll try to lay out what happened next as best I can.

One after another, faces appeared before me—a slideshow of loved ones who'd left and loved ones who remained. I named each one and asked my Father to drench them in himself.

The slide reel stopped. My mind pivoted. *Do I want to go home? Do I want to stay in prison? Yes and yes.* A discussion I could never fully



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in any doing on my part. It was a welcome kiss from I AM just because i am. In the Isaiah passage, an angel of the Lord presses a hot coal to the Prophet's mouth and pronounces his brokenness healed. As he'd done for his beloved spokesman so many centuries ago, YHWH was filling in the cracks in my foundation, letting me know it was safe to let go of all my planning and all my trying and find rest on my Master's breast.

The Holy Whisper and I exchanged I-love-yous. The laughter and tears, tears and laughter, continued to cycle. I became an astronaut with God, looking down at our Blue Marble and wanting this same shalom for all of my fellow creatures.

explain took place in an instant without words. *I want what you want, Lord. Have your way.*

Then more faces. People from MLUL, SHBC, I/O, APBP, Yoke Fellowship, and Kairos.

So many partners striving to repair our battered world. *We need your grace. We need your mercy. Hurry and help us!*

Suddenly, the desire to bring God's peace to this prison was a three-hundred-pound bar on my chest. All I had to do was press and rack it. It seemed so possible as to be almost inevitable. *Just keep pushing*

Then my attention turned inward again. *How silly is it that I take my work so seriously. I think I'm that necessary?* The Lord and I shared

another chuckle, this one about how often I forgot where my power came from, how much weight I needlessly bore, how much joy I cost myself.

A final face grinned elfishly. She was a friend I'd known for thirty-five years. Afflicted with Williams Syndrome, she'd never been able to enjoy a normal life. Her birthday was approaching and I hadn't heard from her in a while. *Lord, sustain her.* Then I wandered out of the moment down an odd path. What if God called me to marry her? I envisioned a wedding. I considered a wedding night. Could I consummate the marriage? Somehow I'd drifted from prayer to imagination land, and the visual wasn't pretty.

I opened my eyes and studied the floor. Flecks of dirt dotted the landscape. How could I even go there? Grayish splotches in the wax that one of the cell's previous inhabitants had laid down reminded me of the kinds of stains a person might find on the bedspread at a Motel 6.

*What's wrong with me?* Aware of my own internal corruption, I instinctively recoiled from God's presence.

Then a verse I'd recently read in Leviticus shot up like a flare: "You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy." When scripture calls YHWH "holy" the word encompasses everything about God that sets him apart from us and makes him worthy of reverence, adoration, and fear.

YHWH is the apex of moral excellence, infinitely perfect in righteousness, purity, and integrity. Holy is the way that God is. He doesn't conform to a standard: He is the standard. He's whole and complete and incapable of being anything else. Knowing that I couldn't even measure up to God's standard

for twenty minutes while alone and praying made me feel warped and disgusting. Covering myself with faith, I shut my eyes again and sought refuge from God in God.

"I'm so sorry, Lord," I said. "I really am a mess."

An impression of Jesus hanging from a rough-hewn wooden crossbeam spread panoramically across my consciousness. "I died for you," said the Whisper.

My soul's gaze, directly into the Son, allowed him to simultaneously expose and purify me. I was an evacuee, pulled from a burning building, wrapped in a blanket and given a cup of tea to ease the tension. "Thank you," I replied.

Those were the last words we shared. Something inside told me the visit was over. I took a minute to gather myself before pushing up from the ground. I brushed the particles off my sweatshirt and felt like I'd just awoken from a successful surgery. I flipped on the overhead fluorescents and glanced around. Nothing had moved, but something was different. There was an ambience that hadn't been there before. Life was in the air. It made me want to clean the floor, and it made me want to sing. I did both.

A half hour later, the call for block yard was announced over the intercom. I hit the button and ventured outside. Strolling back and forth across the hoop court, I hoped someone would fall in with me. I needed to share what I'd experienced. I needed to tell everyone how kind and beautiful the King of Creation truly was. He hunts messes like me. He embraces us. He calls us worthy and makes it so. He doesn't just change our plans; he changes us.