

A Strange Gait

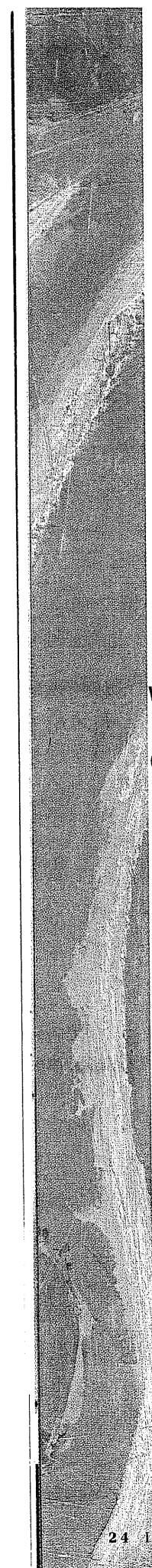
The Christian walk is an odd mix of humility and confidence.

I have participated in hundreds of elder meetings. But this one was different. We were restoring Rick, a fallen elder, to fellowship.

I had been encouraged by the way the other elders walked with our brother through a dark season of sin and marital separation. Now we had gathered to celebrate Rick's return to his faith and family. Though it was not yet time to welcome him back into church leadership, we wanted to celebrate a "Yea, God!" moment with him. It was my responsibility to cap our time together by praying for Rick.

As I bowed my head, I realized I hadn't prepared for this moment. By the kindness of the Spirit, words came—words that held great meaning for me. Though the prayer was for Rick, it captured the essence of my 20-year spiritual journey: "Kind Father, please allow us to learn the strange gait of walking with You in complete brokenness and full confidence. Broken, because we have been greatly humbled; confident, because we are greatly forgiven and lavishly loved."

by John Stumbo



As our meeting went on, I mused on that prayer. I could sense an emerging life principle. God was allowing this event to help me better understand His work in my own life.

Like Rick, I have been learning the odd stride—the strange gait—of being completely humbled by my fallen nature, yet walking with shoulders squared and head high because I’m a fully forgiven follower of Christ.

Lessons in Limping

My initial lesson came from Pastor Steve. Though quiet, his presence drew attention. His basketball-player build and gentle smile suggested leadership before he spoke a word. I was only 20, but Steve believed in me and entrusted a room full of teenagers into my care. I was their youth pastor. I was nervous. I feared making a mistake. I feared I would not measure up in the eyes of the parents, the teens, and Pastor Steve. I wanted to be used by God in

Some people find it difficult to think of words such as *dependence* and *brokenness* without picturing a shattered or damaged condition. This is not the manner in which I am using these concepts. In Psalm 51, David shows us a brokenness that honors God: “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise” (v. 17). In this context, David’s brokenness arose from a vivid awareness of his sin. David uses the same Hebrew word translated *broken* again in Psalm 34, this time to describe a season of grief: “The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit” (v. 18).

The paths to brokenness will vary, but the end product is an attitude that quickly acknowledges our true condition before God: We are needy people. It’s OK to admit it. We are dependent people—dependent upon the earth’s Creator. We should not be ashamed of it.

I’m not concerned about the term we use—be it *neediness*, *brokenness*, *dependence*, or another

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the lives of these students, but a nervous energy complicated everything I did.

Eight months into the youth ministry, Steve invited me to attend a pastors’ conference with him and another staff member. After one of the evening sessions, we returned to the hotel room to pray. I was amazed to see Steve spread his tall frame on the floor. Face down, arms outstretched, he called out, “O God! We are utterly dependent upon You. We are completely unable to do Your work. We desperately need You if we are to accomplish anything of eternal value.”

Steve led a growing church. He had entered a troubled situation and was nursing it to health. I viewed him as confident and self-assured. Now I was surprised to glimpse the real reason for the church’s success: Steve understood brokenness. He spoke a language of dependence upon God.

The contrast between Steve’s heart and mine was stark. I feared I would disappoint people; he feared he would work independently of God’s power. I feared making humiliating mistakes; Steve willingly took a posture of humility to acknowledge His profound need for God’s wisdom.

descriptor. I *am* burdened that we understand how significant it is that we are wholly reliant upon God. This theme is so important that it is woven broadly throughout Scripture. Allow me to give a brief tour.

We sigh as we read of the failures of Old Testament leaders who tried to walk independently of God’s strength. Abraham hurries the promise and has a child through Hagar. Saul can’t wait another hour for Samuel and takes the priestly role of sacrifice into his own hands.

Meanwhile, we rejoice as we read of those who recognize their deep need for God’s continual intervention. Gideon dismisses more than 90 percent of his army yet marches forward in boldness. David slits Saul’s robe instead of Saul’s throat because he’s confident he serves a God who works out His own plan in His own time. As we close the Old Testament, the prophets are declaring, “Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,” says the LORD Almighty” (Zech. 4:6).

As we turn to the New Testament, we find the same theme. Christ’s words are brief and blunt: “Apart from me you can do nothing” (Jn. 15:5).

We're amazed to read that Jesus lived with a continual spirit of dependence:

I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does.
—Jn. 5:19

The Apostle Paul goes so far as to say,

I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.
—2 Cor. 12:9-10

The understanding Christian has no option but to choose a posture of neediness. Our hearts resonate with the ancient songwriter who looked to heaven and sang,

As the eyes of slaves look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a maid look to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the LORD our God, till he shows us his mercy.
—Ps. 123:2

We would expect such needy, humbled people to scuff their feet as they walk with stooped shoulders and bowed heads. Such might be the case were it not for a balancing truth: We are called to a bolder step than one would expect.

Holy Boldness

The humility of a Christian is unique because it is countered by a confidence that changes the picture entirely. The paradoxical walk of the Christ follower reveals an awareness of our need *while* we joyfully move forward with holy boldness. This stride has not come naturally to me, but it is improving.

Recently, my high school daughter achieved regional recognition as a cross-country runner. Anna's accomplishments earned an invitation to compete in a major race sponsored by Nike at their headquarters in Portland, Oregon. During the two-day event, each participant received a free "gait analysis" in one of Nike's labs.

A video camera connected to a computer captured Anna's steps as she ran an eight-mile-per-hour pace on a treadmill. The recorded footage was then replayed on a large monitor in a motion slower than I knew possible: We viewed a single stride for a full 30 seconds. The technicians noted each movement of the foot and ankle, gave advice, and recommended a style of shoe designed specifically for Anna's type of stride.

I returned home determined to do a gait analysis of my own.

If a video replayed my daily walk, I'm sure it would reveal a tendency toward hesitancy and timidity. I'm frequently apolo-

getic in speaking the truth and bashful in conversations of significance. As a leader I too often resemble King Saul, who at a key public moment was found hiding in the luggage pile.

My timid gait is in direct contrast to that of the Apostle Paul, who described his stride on more than one occasion. In 1 Corinthians 9, Paul explains that he brings his body into submission and guards against "running aimlessly" so that he might "run in such a way as to get the prize" (vv. 24-27). Later, in 2 Corinthians 2, Paul changes the scene to a victory parade: "But thanks be to God, who always leads us in a triumphal procession in Christ" (v. 14). Paul's head was held high, not in conceit but in celebration. No one slouches in a ticker-tape parade!

With these pictures in mind, I walked with greater confidence yesterday as I crossed the yard to talk to my neighbors who do not attend church. We've befriended each other for 18 months, but I've been reluctant to turn the conversation to church or Christ. After chatting about their ever-friendly dog, I mentioned that I thought they had once told me they enjoyed classical music. Our church choir, I explained, was partnering with a local orchestra for a concert that would include Vivaldi's masterpiece, "Gloria in D Major." Perhaps they would be interested? To my delight and relief, they were pleased to receive the invitation and agreed to attend.

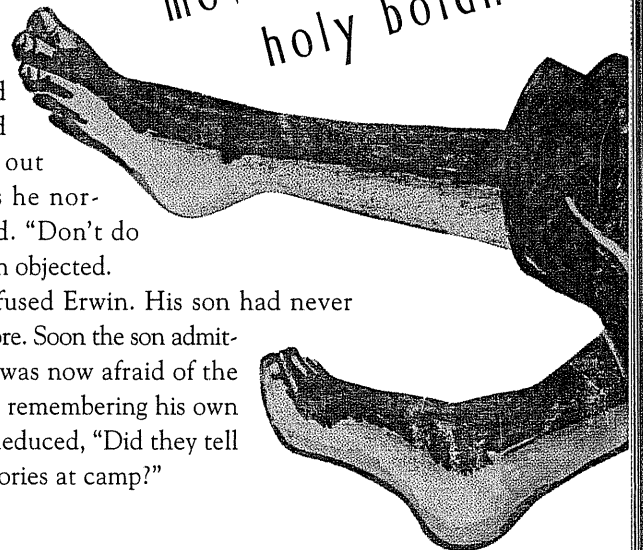
This boldness is growing in me and needs to continue if I am to obey the admonition given to another timid leader, Timothy. Paul challenged him not to be ashamed: "God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline" (2 Tim. 1:7).

Pastor and author Erwin McManus displays holy boldness in a story he tells of the night his young son came home from his first experience at church camp.

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Erwin tucked him into bed and turned out the light as he normally would. "Don't do that," his son objected.

This confused Erwin. His son had never objected before. Soon the son admitted that he was now afraid of the dark. Erwin, remembering his own childhood, deduced, "Did they tell you ghost stories at camp?"



"No, Dad. They told *demon* stories."

Oh, great, thought Erwin. Now what do I do? I can't tell him that demons don't exist.

"Pray that I won't be afraid of the demons, Dad."

Erwin's answer was surprising, "No. That's not what I'm going to pray. I'm going to pray that you will be so dangerous the demons will flee when you walk into the room."

I understand that we must not be flippant or arrogant about the spirit world. However, I'm convinced that this father's courage-inspiring assurance is well founded in Scripture. Ours is not a cowering, timid, or foot-shuffling faith.

In Romans, we learn, "For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship" (8:15). Can you imagine the Lord granting us His Spirit so that we would slink around in fear? Can you picture the Father granting us the privilege of sonship but telling us to cower like slaves? It is His place to declare our status; it is our responsibility to live it out.

Powerful Provision

Just as we may discount the significance of our dependence on God, too many of us have forgotten—or never known—the significance of our salvation. We need a new appreciation for the power we've come to underestimate. When we glimpse anew what the Bible says about God's work in us and His provision for us, we can step into life's challenges with renewed confidence.

In his first all-star game in 1986, pitcher Roger Clemens had earned the honor of starting for the American League. This meant, however, that he would have to bat for his team as well. Because of the American League's designated-hitter rule, he hadn't batted in years. In the second inning, he stepped up to the plate and took a few uncertain practice swings. Facing him was the intimidating Dwight Gooden, who had won the Cy Young award the previous year. Gooden fired a white-hot fastball past Clemens. Stunned, Clemens stepped away from the batter's box and asked catcher Gary Carter, "Is that what my pitches look like?"

"You bet," replied Carter.

Clemens quickly struck out but went on to pitch three perfect innings and be named the Most Valuable Player both for that game and, at the end of the season, the entire American League.

He later admitted that his fresh reminder of how overpowering a good fastball can be caused him to pitch with far greater boldness from that day on.

A similar perspective occurred to me one morn-

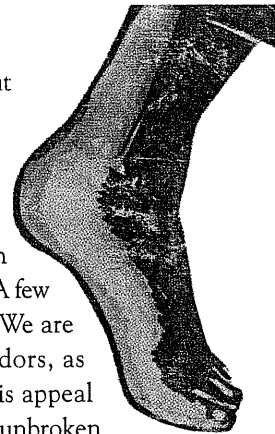
ing: I was feeling insecure about the sermon I was soon to deliver. As I opened my Bible, Paul's conviction struck me: "In Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God" (2 Cor. 2:17). A few chapters later, he declares, "We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us" (5:20). From an unbroken heart, such statements would appear arrogant. But from Paul, who knew his own weakness, these words reveal empowering, godly confidence.

Stepping up to the pulpit that day—and most days since—I experienced greater freedom. I can look people in the eye and boldly challenge them (in grace, I trust). If I have been called by God, am walking in obedience, have studied His Word, and am listening for His message for our congregation, why should I speak with an apologetic timidity? How encouraging to hear in response, "Thank you for not backing away from saying the hard things." I should be humble, yes, but confident—a person who lives with a fire in his eye and a limp in his step.

I believe this is the way Jacob walked later in life. I don't pretend to understand the mystical, all-night wrestling match described in Genesis 32. What I do understand is that, in one night, one of the Bible's more arrogant and aggressive characters was changed. By daybreak, Jacob had encountered God—an encounter that left him more confident than ever. He had seen God and received a new name. Yet he also experienced a new humility: An injury to his hip socket caused him to walk with a distinct limp. The touch to his hip seemed to have reached all the way into his spirit. As the sun rose, he hobbled onward to be reconciled with his brother.

This is the strange gait of the Christ follower. We are confident because we are the fully loved children of God. We're completely forgiven of even our most shameful sins. We stand in line for our inheritance from the Father right next to Jesus, who amazingly allows us to be His "co-heirs" (Ro. 8:17). If we are "more than conquerors" (v. 37), how could we not walk with a victory-parade stride? We have every reason to celebrate. How great a salvation!

Yet we know that we contributed absolutely nothing to this salvation. What is more, our bodies are frail, our time on earth is brief, our resolve is weak, and our old nature is ever drooling over sin. We have every reason to be humble.



Consequently, we limp on with confidence, as my friend Rick is doing. My path intersects with Rick's quite often. Through spiritual disciplines and counseling, he's rebuilding the foundations of his personal walk and marriage. As I watch, I'm encouraged. I see no cocky swagger or strut. I see no slumped shoulders of defeat either. Watching him causes me to assess my own stride. In Rick's and—I trust—in my life, the prayer for a strange gait is being answered. ♦

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



JOHN STUMBO is a pastor in Salem, Oregon, where he smiles when he sees people being baptized.

John hopes that one day he can run a marathon with his daughter—and keep up with her for at least the first half-mile. Until then, he'll keep

taking long hikes on lonely trails.

ON YOUR OWN

Footnotes

1. The author describes two seemingly opposite characteristics of the Christian life. What are they? _____

2. In the following passages, note which characteristic the Apostle Paul talks about.

- a. Broken and greatly humbled
- b. Confident and bold

___ Ro. 8:23-24

___ 1 Cor. 4:16

___ Gal. 2:1-5,11

___ Gal. 6:14

___ Gal. 6:17

___ Phil. 1:20

___ 1 Tim. 1:15

3. In 2 Cor. 12:7-10, Paul describes what it's like to be humbled and fully confident at the same time. What is the reason we can experience these two qualities simultaneously (v. 9)? _____

4. How do each of these qualities point the glory back to God? _____

THIS GUY'S A PROFESSOR



MEET SCOTT RAE, PH.D.

Professor of Biblical Studies and Christian Ethics

Scott is an ethical consultant for five large hospitals in Southern California. He's also author of several critical books like *Bioethics: A Christian Approach in a Pluralistic Age* (Eerdmans), *Beyond Integrity: A Judeo-Christian Approach to Business Ethics* (Zondervan) and *Body and Soul: Human Nature and the Crisis in Ethics* (InterVarsity).

Scott brings his real-life ministry experience to the classroom. Sometimes he even takes students with him on his rounds. At Talbot, you'll find many more professors like Scott who integrate their ministry experience into their teaching.

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