In the Heart of a Child, One Moment. . .

Can Last Forever

JUST A MINUTE

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WITH DEAN MERRILL

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To the very next child

God brings across your path . . .

if only for just a minute.

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Section One

A MOMENT FOR RESCUE

My sportscaster friend Jerry Schemmel, now the well-known "Voice of the Colorado Rockies," survived the 1989 crash of United Flight 232 at Sioux City, Iowa. Miraculously he emerged safe in a cornfield, relieved and standing clear of the burning wreckage . . . when he heard a baby's screams still inside that smoke-filled fuselage. He dashed back into the carnage, followed the cries through the billowing smoke, and rescued a little eleven-month-old girl named Sabrina Michaelson. His story is told in his powerful book *Chosen to Live*.

As Jerry sat in my office reliving that story for me, I wanted to jump up and say, "Me too! That's what I would have done!"

But would I? Would you?

Nothing grips our hearts more on the evening news, putting a lump in our throats, than watching a firefighter rescue a shivering child from an icy lake—or a bloodied soldier hoisting his wounded friend onto his shoulder and carrying him to safety amid a hail of bullets and explosions. Such acts of selfless heroism cannot be rehearsed or anticipated. That amazing spirit either resides deep within us, or it doesn't. The drama seizes us in an unexpected moment, and we act—or we don't—in just a minute.

There are no second chances, no coulda-woulda-shoulda options. In the instant, heroes seldom know the full significance of what they are doing. In fact, they may never know. *Is this child's life a fair exchange for my own? If I die in the process of rescuing her, will she live to achieve more*

than I might have? There is no time for such thoughts.

When, in retrospect, we learn years later what that child grew up to be, we say, "Wow, thank goodness!" But when we *don't* know, we should also say, "Wow, thank goodness!" A life is precious for what it *is,* not just for what it *does*. The truth is that every child is valuable. They are lovingly knit by their Creator in their mother's womb, one at a time. They are born one at a time. They live and die one at a time. And they can be rescued one at a time, usually by selfless heroes . . . notice, usually not by politicians, millionaires, or celebrities, but by ordinary people, with extraordinary hearts.

In this crazy, fast-paced world, it is easy for the weakest, the most vulnerable, the littlest among us to get hurt in the stampede.

The Most Vulnerable

When the news cameras zoom back from the face of a specific boy or girl in peril to reveal the masses across our world, however, it is easy (and understandable) to move from empathy to apathy. The sheer magnitude of children in poverty is overwhelming. Most of society, even caring people, feel they can't possibly do all that needs to be done, and so they become paralyzed. They end up doing nothing. The great British statesman Edmund Burke is best remembered for this one sentence: "All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is for good people to do nothing."

In this crazy, fast-paced world, it is easy for the weakest, the most vulnerable, the littlest among us to get hurt in the stampede. They need our "just a minute" moment of safety and rescue that they so richly deserve.

That thought came to mind recently when I was driving along an Oregon highway. I came to a row of orange highway cones and flashing signs that said "Construction Zone. All fines doubled. Injure a worker and receive a $15,000 fine and mandatory jail time."

Needless to say, that got my attention. I slowed down and kept a wary eye out for the road crew. The last thing I wanted to do was to get that kind of fine . . . and, oh yes, to hurt a worker. Sadly, I believe it was in that order.

This warning was needed because in the everyday commutes of our lives, it is easy to miss the people and things going on around us. Yet these guys in a dangerous zone were concentrating on their construction work and needed the rest of us to watch out for them. They were vulnerable on that stretch of road.

As I cleared the area and sped off, I got to thinking. Isn't that exactly the mind-set we need to hold for the welfare of children in our world today? They are vulnerable to everything dangerous around them. They are concentrating on the busy task of growing up. They aren't yet aware of the hazards on all sides. Looking out for them should be our job.

If a child is around, we should be on high alert, not just to not harm them, but to rescue them when needed and to advance them lovingly in any way we can. Anything harmful done by society racing by should receive double the fine compared to causing the same harm to an adult! That might make criminals pause before robbing a store that has children in it, or breaking into a house where they see toys in the yard. "Oops, better watch out—there are children around here." It might slow down a pervert who is about to sexually molest a minor.

It is the duty of all of us who make up society to protect, nurture, and bless the children entrusted to us. Life, as we've said, has value because it *is,* not necessarily for what it *does*. But as a man named Herb Gilbey discovered, sometimes it's both.

ERRAND OF MERCY

WHEN THE SNOW IS FLYING and the wind is howling, you naturally want to stay inside your own warm home. Herb Gilbey certainly did that night back in 1918 as a blizzard roared across South Dakota. He wanted nothing more than to hold a cup of hot chocolate between his hands and look out the window.

But there was a knock at the door. His neighbor, a pharmacist, had come over for some reason. "Come in, come in—get out of the

cold!" Herb said as he ushered his friend into the living room.

When the neighbor pulled back the scarf from his face, Herb could tell that he didn't look good. He knew the man had been working long hours, trying to help people all over town as they battled the flu epidemic that was in full force just then. They both had read in the papers that some 20 million Americans had been stricken so far, with thousands of deaths.

"Are you all right?" Herb inquired.

"Yes, I'll be okay," the man answered huskily. "But Pinky"—the nickname of his seven-year-old son—"has got it really bad. It's turned into pneumonia now. I don't know if he's going to make it. . . ." The father's voice cracked as he said this last sentence.

"Oh, no!" Herb replied. "Can we do anything to help?"

"Well . . . that's why I came over," the pharmacist replied. "There is a new drug—still kind of experimental—that seems to work pretty well against pneumonia. But I don't have any of it here. The closest place to get it is at the big supply house in Minneapolis. I was just wondering . . ." His voice trailed off.

Herb looked again at his neighbor's flushed face. The man was in no condition to attempt a drive of two hundred fifty miles east and then back again. What an ordeal that would be in this weather, even for a healthy person.

But . . . he couldn't just let little Pinky succumb. Herb thought for another moment, then said, "Okay. I'll give it a try. What's the address?"

Herb Gilbey went out and got his Model-T Ford started in the cold. It had no heater, but soon he was on the rough, mostly unpaved road anyway, headed for the Minnesota state line. He drove all night through the snowstorm, rarely topping thirty-five miles an hour. By morning, he arrived in the big city, found the supplier, got the medicine, and turned right around to start back to South Dakota.

Pinky survived.

Herb Gilbey passed away in due time, feeling gratified about

> his good deed for the neighbor boy. He didn't live long enough to see Pinky reach his full stature on the American stage . . . as a U.S. Senator and Vice President of the United States. People by then were calling him by his more proper name: Hubert H. Humphrey.

The child you rescue may hold incredible potential. A small act when the boy or girl is in jeopardy may change the course of history. We never know. Given that uncertainty, we always need to lean toward the side of protection and rescue.

The Humphrey story reminds me of a similar crisis that broke back in the early 1700s, when a cottage in Epworth, England, caught fire. The masterful biographer of John Wesley (known in childhood as "Jacky") opens his book this way:

PLUCKED FROM THE BURNING

> THE ROOM SEEMED LIGHT already, yet the bed curtains were closed, and the nursemaid had not yet gotten him up. Jacky lay puzzled for a moment, then put out his head from the four-poster. He saw streaks of fire on the ceiling.
>
> In the lurid glow he noticed that Molly and Anne, two of his sisters who slept in the same great bed with him, were gone, and the other bed, where the nurse slept with Patty and baby Charles, was empty. Five-year-old Jacky ran to the open door. The floor outside was ablaze. He ran back and climbed onto a chest of drawers near the window and pulled at the latch.
>
> Above him the thatched roof of the rectory crackled and burned in the strong northeast wind. Below, a crowd of neighbors were gathered in the yard and were trying to douse the flames. Jacky edged onto the windowsill as far as he dared. He saw a man point up, then call out that he would fetch a ladder.
>
> Another cried, "There will not be time!" This tall, burly neighbor

> leaned against the wall while eager hands helped a lighter man to climb onto his shoulders. As the heat behind Jacky grew intense, the fellow stood upright, stretched his arms, and plucked the boy out of the window. At that moment the roof fell in, "but it fell inward, or we had all been crushed at once."
>
> They carried Jacky to the house where the family had taken refuge. Apparently Hetty, who was eleven, had been woken by a piece of burning thatch and had given the alarm. Their father, the rector of Epworth, had run to the room where his wife slept apart because she was ill and pregnant. She woke their eldest daughter, and they dashed through the flames to safety.
>
> Then the rector rushed upstairs to the nursery. The maid seized baby Charles and ordered the others to follow, but no one noticed that Jacky lay fast asleep through the uproar. When the rector realized the child was missing, he tried to get up the stairs again, but they were on fire and would not bear his weight. In agony of mind he knelt in the hall and commended John Wesley's soul to God.
>
> But here was Jacky safe and sound, "a brand plucked out of the burning."[1] The Reverend Samuel Wesley, his house in ashes, his books and writings gone, cried out in joy: "Come, neighbors! Let us kneel down! Let us give thanks to God! He has given me all eight children. Let the house go. I am rich enough!"[2]

Had that peasant not found the courage and strength to move close to the heat, becoming a human ladder to lift another up who would snatch a young lad from a burning window . . . well, the world might never have seen the great Methodist awakening that John Wesley spearheaded. No doubt that image led to the conversion of many listeners as he retold the story; they came to see themselves in the same danger as little Jacky, except for them it was the inferno of hell. And I assume that peasant surely got a shock when he entered heaven and discovered how many souls were present as a result of his "just a minute" moment.

Sometimes the rescue takes place before the child is even born. I have

become convinced that the womb is in fact the most dangerous place on earth to be a child. Sometimes the risk is because of poverty. Sadly sometimes it is merely "inconvenience" that ends a life. In the following case, the endangered child has become a great hero of mine.

NOT AGAIN?

HIS PARENTS MARRIED during the Great Depression. Two children quickly arrived—and then, to their dismay, the young couple discovered they were pregnant with a third child before their fourth anniversary. Those were painfully tough financial times, and another child certainly wasn't in their plan.

But . . . against all logic they became convinced God had planned this child for them. They chose to have the baby, yet another one—this time a boy. And their son now writes, "I'm so grateful they did. . . . Our family came to know a joy in family life that we otherwise would never have known." Today, all three of those children are in Christian service. And as the noted preacher and author Chuck Swindoll says, "Because they thought those unselfish thoughts many years ago, I'm able to write these things today."[3]

This would come as no surprise to Chuck Swindoll, but if ever you wonder if God loves little children, notice His accounts of rescues in the nick of time. The Bible records at least three of them.

1. A priest's wife named Jehosheba, truly an unsung hero, snuck into the royal palace and snatched her infant nephew Joash away to safety. Otherwise his wicked grandmother, Queen Athaliah, would have killed him along with all his brothers. Seven years later, Joash was named king and went on to reign for four decades. Really—read it in 2 Kings 11.
2. We don't even know the name of the nurse who swept up Prince

Jonathan's little son Mephibosheth into her arms and fled as the royal house of King Saul was crashing to pieces all around him. In her haste, she tragically dropped the child, crippling him for life. But she *could* so easily in that panicked moment have saved her own neck and left him, just one more to be slaughtered. She didn't. Later as an adult, he was brought to the palace of King David to live the rest of his life in comfort, as a show of David's great love for Mephibosheth's father. This story appears in 2 Samuel 4:4 . . . you can't make this stuff up!

3. Finally, there's the great prophet Elijah, who in 1 Kings 17:17–23 wouldn't give up his vigil to bring back to life the dead son of a grieving widow who had been kind to him for a long time. Elijah, no newcomer to miracles, was disappointed that God didn't answer his fervent prayer. But he refused to stop praying for the boy, even though God didn't seem to be listening. He prayed not once, not twice, but three times, and would have prayed more if God had not then intervened and raised the boy to life. (I guess it sometimes takes more than "just a minute.")

Unknown but Not Forgotten

Sometimes the act of kindness we do for a child, though it takes just a minute, can reverberate for a lifetime. Like the ripples from a pebble tossed into a pond, we may never know how far our action spreads or where it finally comes to rest.

One of our Compassion International staff members in Colorado Springs has a wonderful teenage son. Christopher Dana was a model student, an athlete, and a godly young man. He had a minor curvature of his spine that required a fairly basic surgery to straighten things out as he was finishing up the development of his strong, growing body.

But something that morning in the operation went horribly wrong. In a matter of just minutes, Christopher was left paralyzed. Brokenhearted, I visited him in the hospital. *Oh, Lord, what do I possibly say to him?* I moaned as I entered the room.

I tried to say the right things that day, and then I prayed with him. Leaving, I wasn't sure I had been much help.

Months passed, and Christopher entered therapy. All of us at Compassion prayed daily for him and his overwhelmed family. In time I started hearing good reports from Sean and Michelle, his courageous parents.

One day, my assistant Angie came into my office, tears in her eyes. "I think you should come see this," she said quietly.

Out in the lobby sat Christopher in his wheelchair. As I approached him, he painfully stood to his feet! His father said, "Christopher has been working for many months with this one goal. He's wanted to come here and show you his ability to walk 200 feet—into your office." They had measured it off with tape on the floor.

I had rarely seen such courage. Step by step Christopher moved his feet, a smile on his face but at times contorted into a grimace of determination, all the way until he slowly eased himself down into the president's chair at my desk. We cheered wildly.

Then he pulled out a folded list of questions he had been drafting all these painful months.

"Dr. Stafford," he began, "who was the greatest influence on your life?"

My mind raced back to my precious father, a missionary in West Africa. I told Christopher how he had made me believe in myself. I described how we had built our house together on the hot, windswept plains . . . okay, I was just six years old and surely not much help, but he made me believe we had built it together! I told how he had managed to make his little son feel like a real partner in ministry, and how I, while away at boarding school, had worried that he couldn't possibly do his missionary work without me. "It was my dad, Christopher. He made me believe in myself."

We sat there in silence for a moment, lost in our thoughts. Then, on a whim, I asked him to answer the same question he had asked me.

"You, Mr. President," he replied. "When you visited me in my hospital room right after my injury, you told me, 'Christopher—never give up!'"

I could barely remember saying those words. The situation had been so grim, the odds so stacked against him. I had no idea the power of that

sentence to motivate this young man. But in a single minute, my words had sunk into the cement of his soul, instilling him with courage and resolve beyond my wildest hope.

You never quite know when a young life is hanging by a thread.

Those few words, he told me, had carried him through the darkest nights, had convinced him to get up the next morning and keep trying. For months he had fallen and gotten up again—such pain, despair, determination—but also faith and courage. I'm sure many others must have said the same words in their visits. But so had I. And in such a minute, hope had found its way into the heart of this brave young man.

Little Jessica

You never quite know when a young life is hanging by a thread, physically or otherwise, and your intervention will make a major difference. You don't know the significance of the moment. I've seen it happen time and again.

One of my most precious Compassion moments was on the far side of the world, in Manado, Indonesia. The little church I entered that day was constructed of weather-beaten, hand-hewn wood from the surrounding jungle. The 100 or so children had gathered in the sanctuary and were all sitting cross-legged on the wood floor, their eyes eager to see these strange visitors who had arrived. Their teachers stood along the walls; mothers and a few fathers gathered shyly at the back of the room.

The children sang and danced and recited Scripture and poetry for us. So poor, yet so precious in every way. Then I was asked if I wanted to say a few words to them.

I thought fast. What could I say to let them know how precious they were, how loved by Compassion, by their little church . . . as well as their sponsors on the other side of the world? I started in a lighthearted vein: "In all the world I have never seen a place with such beautiful children!" I exclaimed. "Your parents must be so very proud of you! You produce such lovely singing. And all those Bible verses! You must be very, very smart."

The children giggled. The teachers were smiling, eyes twinkling with

gratitude. The poverty-stricken parents looked at their little ones with newfound respect and pride.

"Does anybody know what you want to be when you grow up?" I asked. A few brave hands went up.

"A soldier," one boy said.

"A policeman," said another.

"A teacher," added a third. The adults beamed.

"A pastor," said a fourth.

I pointed out a little boy and said, "I think I see a future doctor." He grinned. "And look!" I continued. "Somewhere in this room might be a future President of Indonesia! Do you know which one? No? Well, you'd better treat every child here like you would the President of your country, because you never know!" The room buzzed with excitement.

In the very front row, sitting at my feet, was a beautiful but frail little girl, maybe six years old. Her eyes were looking up at me wide in wonder. She was too shy to have shouted out any dreams.

My heart paused a moment. I had an idea.

"Do you know how precious you all are to God? He knows you and loves you more than anything else in the whole world. Like this little girl . . ." I knelt down and gently lifted her up in my arms. "Do any of you know her name?"

"Jessica," they all called out. I looked at her face, and she shyly nodded; they had it right.

"Jesus knows Jessica's name," I said. "But do any of you know how many hairs she has on her head?" Silence.

"Jesus does! He loves little Jessica so much that He keeps track of everything about her, even the number of hairs on her head.

"Did you ever look closely at the tips of your fingers? See those tiny lines, that little design? Jesus made every one of you unique, special." I took Jessica's little fingers in my hands. "God loved Jessica so much he drew her very own picture on her fingers like nobody else's in the whole world." Jessica looked intently at her fingers, until a shy smile formed. She snuggled deeper into my arms.

"God knew her before she was even born. He knit her in her mama's womb. And look—he made her beautiful, gave her her very own laugh, her beautiful eyes. He knows exactly what she will be when she grows up. She has no idea how special she is to God, and how loved. Jesus would have died on the cross for her even if she was the only child on earth!"

The room grew suddenly quiet. As I glanced around at the teachers, I saw eyes brimming. A tear trickled down the craggy face of the peasant pastor beside me. Something seemed to be happening here. . . .

I laid my hand on little Jessica's head and prayed. I thanked God for every child in that church, but especially for Jessica's life and for loving her so much. Then I moved to place her back on the floor where I'd found her.

But her arms held tightly around my neck. Slowly, reluctantly, she released me. In her eyes I saw tears like those of the teachers'. What was going on here? What had turned the party atmosphere into a somber moment?

I returned to my chair to sit down. A few minutes later, the pastor leaned over to whisper, "You couldn't possibly have known—but if ever a little girl needed to be lovingly held and affirmed, it was Jessica right now."

Why was that? Before leaving that place, the staff told me with broken hearts that just a month or so earlier, little Jessica had been savagely raped by a man in her neighborhood. She had been so violated that she needed surgery, stitches, and hospitalization. The pastor and the church had courageously pressured the legal authorities on her behalf. But the man had gotten off with no penalty, no jail, nothing—by paying a bribe of just $300.

The little church was devastated. Once again in poverty, justice had failed, and the poor had paid the price. An innocent little girl had suffered the brutality of a world that has lost its heart. "We are amazed that she would even let you, a man, pick her up and hold her in your arms," the teachers said.

Years have passed since that incident, and I'm told that our brief moment together was the beginning of her healing. She is beginning to blossom again in mind, soul, and spirit.

I carry a picture of Jessica with me now. I am so grateful that I got to be a part of a "moment" that is healing and transforming her life day by day.

* * * * * *

So, do mere minutes matter? Can God use any of us to be that moment's hero? Can a minute transform a life? Can a child be snatched from death's door? Can a minute of loving words breathe a lifetime of newfound hope in the darkest of hours? Can a single act of kindness ripple on for eternity, blessing others we may never meet or know?

The answer is yes . . . oh, yes! Deep within the spirit of all of us resides an amazing hero just waiting for the moment, for the curtains of life to open so we can walk out onto the stage and do the right thing that will make all the difference.