

A PATH OF YOUR OWN

by
BARTON GREEN

The introductory short story for the hardback devotional

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Several years have gone by and I've tried many times to tell Papa what I saw and heard that night, but to this day he dismisses it as a childish dream. He told me never to speak of it again. Still, there has to be some explanation for how and why my Grampa just -- disappeared.

Everyone loved and respected Grandfather. He was a good man. And though he seemed a little eccentric at times, he was as predictable as a sunset. Each evening after dinner, weather permitting, Grampa would take a long walk down to the river and back. It's strange, but I never paid much attention to those late afternoon strolls, that is, until that night.

I remember that I was feeding the horses, around dusk, when I heard the familiar slam of our front door. Peeking over the top of our old mare's swayed back, I saw Grampa's tall frame standing on the porch. As I watched in amusement, his long, spindly legs paced off the land between the house and the barn in nearly half the time it would take me to run the distance.

Suddenly he stopped. Leaning on his cane, Grampa began to carefully survey the landscape of our farm. As I watched with curiosity I noticed an uncommon zeal in his inspection. It was as if he was trying to memorize every detail of the surrounding hills and trees. Soon, a trace of a smile crossed his face. Then tossing one end of his mantle over his stooped shoulders, Grandfather started off in the direction of the river.

He had taken only a few steps when I heard Papa's voice call out to him from the barn. "Father, wait!" Papa shouted, "Slow down, let me walk with you tonight."

Grandfather took another step, then turned around and held up his hand. "No son, not tonight."

Papa froze in his tracks. "No? What do you mean? What did I do?"

"Nothing, son," he smiled. And with that, he resumed his stride.

Papa seemed confused, hurt. Taking a moment to gather his thoughts, he inched forward in short, sporadic steps. Then, scratching the back of his head, Papa called out again, "Why can't I come with you?"

Flashing an impatient look over his shoulder, Grampa responded, "When you were younger I let you come along, but now you are a man. It's time you found a path of your own."

"But you know I don't like to walk by myself!"

"Son, if you find the right path, you won't be alone."

As Papa wrestled for a reply, I dropped my bucket of feed, and moved closer. Slipping nearer to the conversation, I heard Papa ask, "Should not a son be with his father now and again?"

Straightaway Grampa looked in my direction and pointed at me with his long, twisted cane; "Yes, you are right. There is your son," he smiled, "be with him." Then turning once more toward the river, Grandfather walked on.

Papa was shaken. He stormed up the porch stairs and slammed the front door behind him, causing the clay walls of our house to crack visibly. As for Grampa, I could just make out his lanky figure fading into the distant trees.

In that instant my curiosity awoke. I began to wonder where Grandfather went each night. What was so appealing about that

winding river trail? Then the notion hit me; no no one said that I couldn't tag along. So with a giggle, I took off down the path and into the trees.

By this time the sun was sinking behind the far hills and a hint of a breeze began to whisper through the thicket. I remember that the air was so calm I could hear the bleating of the sheep in the nearby village. And being aware of this silence, I chose my steps carefully, so not to alert Grampa to my presence.

However, after awhile of playing this quiet game of hide and seek, I, being just a child, began to loose interest. Although I had Grandpa in sight, I shrugged my little shoulders with indifference and impulsively turned back toward home.

As I retraced my steps, I recall thinking that Grampa's nightly walks were nothing more than an old man's way of passing time. Yet, just as that thought crossed my mind, the wind began to pick up. In the space of a few seconds, the whispering breeze became a tree-wrestling howl.

Freezing in my tracks, my mind began to race. "A storm! From where? It was so quiet - how!?" My eyes instinctively darted back and forth, searching through the rustling foliage for shelter. Then I saw it. A great light suddenly illuminated the forest. It seemed to be coming from behind me. Turning toward the sight, I rapped my arms around the trunk of a nearby tree and yelled into the wind, "*Grampaaaa !*"

At that very instant everything suddenly - stopped! And just above the subsiding wind I heard the voices of two men - talking! Releasing my grip on the tree, I slowly inched forward. From the sound of their pleasant chatter, it seemed that the two men were old friends. Then I heard a familiar chuckle. It was Grampa.

Peeking my head through the bushes, I saw the two sitting on a rock in the clearing. It was Grampa all right, but the other man I didn't know. I figured he was a friend from the nearby village. They seemed unaffected by the ebbing storm. Their common interest appeared to be focused on their conversation.

As I listened from the bushes, I found myself captivated by their dialogue. The questions Grandfather asked had nothing to do with our farm, or the village, but rather with greater things; subjects I didn't understand. The stranger's answers were even more confusing. Still, crouched in the bushes I listened, not knowing that the fascinating words spoken would be the last I would ever hear from my Grandfather.

"...As always, I have enjoyed our time together sir, but I must be getting back. It is late and my walk back home seems to get longer each time we visit." Using his cane to pull himself to his feet, Grampa let out a weary sigh. "I must say that your words continue to intrigue me. They make me burn with anticipation. It's as if, somehow, I know something wonderful is about to happen; but just what, I am not sure. I don't fully understand it all. Still, wish to know more -- much more."

The stranger gazed up at Grampa and slowly nodded his head, as if pondering a decision. Then slapping his knee with resolve, he likewise stood to his feet. "My friend, you understand far more than you realize. You're closer to my house now than you are to yours. If you want to know more," he smiled, holding out his open palm, "come home with me."

And with that invitation, I saw Grandpa's eyes light up with wonder. And with a boyish smile that I'll always remember, Grandfather leaned on his cane and took the stranger's hand.

Again, unexpectedly, the quiet evening turned into a sudden storm. And just as before, a great light filled the forest. Then, in an instant, all was quiet. Stepping through the bushes and out into the clearing, I realized I was alone. Grampa was no where in sight. The evidence of all that I had witnessed had been swept away by the wind.

Not knowing what else to do, I ran and ran until I reached the front porch of home. As I pushed opened the door, I half expected to see Grampa sitting by the fireplace with Papa and Mama, as they always did this time of night -- but only Papa was there.

"Where have you been? Isn't it enough that I have to worry about your Grandfather?"

Slowly closing the door behind me, I timidly asked, "Isn't Grampa here?" Papa's answer made my thumping heart beat even faster.

"No, he hasn't returned. He's never been away this late."

Slumping into Grandfather's chair, I sat silent and warmed myself by the fire. Finally, after debating in my head what I should do, I hesitantly began to recount for Papa everything I had seen and heard. He didn't believe me. He refused to listen. Papa sent me to my bed and told me to never speak of it again...

But that was many years ago, and I am no longer a child. Now the responsibilities of the family and the farm are on my shoulders. It is a heavy burden and I must contend with it daily. Yet when the weight of those hardships attempt to bend me into the shape of our old swayed-back mare, the memory of Grampa's path fills my thoughts;

"You are closer to my house now than you are to yours. Come home with me..."

The Stranger's words have never left me. Their meaning quiets the fear that often wakes me in the dark of night. And when I rise each morning to face another uncertain day, those reassuring words serve to bolster my resolve.

Eavesdropping on Grandfather's walk taught me an unforgettable lesson; I don't have to face my journey alone. If I am willing, God's Light can shine on my path, too. If I will take the time to listen to His words, He will meet me along the way and extend His helping hand.

There are indeed some folk, like Papa, who try to rationalize away the experience. I, too once thought that Grampa's walks were just an old man's way of passing time. But then I saw the night turn to Light. I saw for myself the reward of grandfather's daily devotion. And by his example I have learned the value of setting aside a portion of the day to find my own path to God.

I have since passed on this important lesson to my son; who, like his Great-Grandfather, has begun taking that long walk down to the river and back. He says that, lately, he's felt the need to "...know more, much more." He wishes the path didn't stop at the river. He wants to go farther. He reminds me of Grampa. I see the same zeal in his eyes.

Like that persevering old man, my boy's determination is as predictable as a sunset. And given that inbred tenacity I doubt that even the boundary of the river will hold him back for long. In fact just today, as I watched him disappear into the distant trees, I saw Papa's wood saw resting on his shoulder. Calling out to him I asked, "What do you plan to do with that, son?" He pointed off toward the river and called back, "I'm building a boat."

Every child of God feels the need to get closer to the Father now and again. It appears that my boy is no exception. Like Grampa, Noah's found a path of his own.

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**This narrative is based on
the biblical account found in
Genesis 5:21-29**

*...And Enoch walked with God:
and was not; for God took him."*