

# **Surrender: Trusting in the Lord Completely**

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My topic today is “Surrender: Trusting in the Lord Completely.” It is based on Proverbs 3:5-6. Here is the NIV translation:

<sup>5</sup>Trust in the LORD with all your heart  
and lean not on your own understanding;  
<sup>6</sup>in all your ways submit to him,  
and he will make your paths straight.

As you know, the book of Proverbs is a wisdom book. The third chapter provides wisdom about how to relate to God in our daily lives. So let’s take a look at these two verses.

## **Trusting the Lord, not your own understanding**

The first line in verse five is “trust in the LORD with all your heart.” Trusting God is very, very fundamental. Faith is *defined* as trust and confidence in God. That’s what faith *is*. If we do not have trust and confidence in God, we do not have faith at all. If we want our faith to be strong, we must trust in the Lord with all our heart.

How do we develop that kind of trust? If we want to really trust the Lord, we need to really *know* the Lord. We need to really *love* the Lord. We need to really *experience* God in our daily lives. As we come to know God better, and become closer to God, our trust will grow stronger and stronger.

The second line in verse five is, “and lean not on your own understanding.” This is not meant to discourage us from seeking understanding. We just need to accept the *limits* of our understanding.

I love to learn things. I get restless when I feel that I am *not* learning anything. I hope to keep learning until the day that God calls me home. I hope you want to keep learning, too. But as much as we learn, we will never know as much

as God. Understanding is good, but wise people know the *limits* of their understanding. Wise people know how much they *don't* know.

So that's the message of the first verse. We must trust in the Lord with all our hearts. We should seek understanding, but we should not *rely* on our own understanding. We should rely on the Lord instead.

### **Submitting to the Lord, not individuals**

The second verse is “in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.” “In all your ways” refers to our daily conduct. We must submit to God in our daily lives.

Notice that we are taught to submit to God, not to other individuals. The body of Christ is meant to be a community. We each have gifts that can make our community strong. Some gifts are easier to see than others, but they all count.

I like the metaphor of two people in a rowboat. One person is rowing, and the other person is steering. Which one is more important? The answer is—both. Without the oarsman, the boat will go nowhere. Without the steersman, the boat will not go where you want it to go. Their tasks and skills are different, but the oarsman and the steersman are both essential.

So we submit to God, and we team up with each other. We work shoulder to shoulder, applying our gifts, and doing God's will, to God's glory.

### **Bias for action**

When I talk about doing God's will, I have a bias for action. Here's what I think. I think that God created this amazing universe, full of wonders and resources; he sent his Son to teach us and save us; and then the Holy Spirit to guide us and encourage us. That means that we have all that we need. Now we are supposed to *do* things. We are supposed to do *God's* things.

That's why I like the aphorism, “Without God, we cannot. Without us, God will not.” We cannot do anything without God. We know that. But God doesn't want to do everything by himself. God wants *us* to do things. That's how we learn and grow. The challenges of daily life help us to grow and develop spiritually. The challenges of daily life give us the opportunity to use the gifts that God has given us. The challenges of daily life help us to become closer to Christ, and experience

the Holy Spirit moving in our lives. So we need to *do* things. We need to do *God's* things. We need to be instruments of the Lord.

I got this bias for action from the Nebraska Methodists who raised me. My parents were born in 1918 and 1923. They were the generation that grew up during the Great Depression of the 1930s and then fought World War II in the 1940s. They had values like love, loyalty, truth, duty, honor, and service. They knew a lot about sacrifice. They thanked God for what they had, even when they had little. And they were very action-oriented. They did whatever needed doing. They believed in hard work. Their faith was manifested in their work.

That's how I was raised, and that is what I believe. We need to *do* things—*God's* things. But there comes a point at which we have done all that we can do. There comes a point at which we have used all the gifts that God has given us. There comes a point at which submission becomes full surrender. And then we simply trust the Lord.

### **And he will remove obstacles**

The sixth verse says: “in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.” One interpretation is that if you submit to the Lord, he will remove the obstacles in your path.

I am sure that many of you have experienced this in your own lives. You submitted to the Lord, and he removed the obstacles in your path. That is what my wife and I experienced when we adopted our three children. I'd like to tell you our story. It was in the moments of complete surrender that God removed the obstacles and made the path straight for us.

### *Kristina*

We adopted our oldest daughter, Kristina Eriko, from the Holy Family Home, an orphanage in Osaka, Japan. It was originally run by Catholic nuns, but later became sponsored by the Japanese government. For nearly 70 years, Holy Family Home has had a special relationship with the U.S. Army Wolfhounds, who are stationed at Schofield Barracks in Wahiawa. We knew Hugh O'Reilly, who was a Master Sergeant in the Wolfhounds, and began the relationship with the orphanage after World War II.

One day in the fall of 1987, Elizabeth and I both had business trips to Japan that ended on the same day. We had heard a lot about Holy Family Home, so we decided to stay an extra day and visit the orphanage.

Hugh O'Reilly knew that we wanted to adopt a child, but he warned us that few of the children at Holy Family Home were available for adoption, so we should not get our hopes up. We went anyway.

Sister Maurice greeted us and showed us around the orphanage. There was a lot of love there, but it was also a heart-wrenching place. Children climbed on us, grabbing an arm or a leg, saying "take me, take me." They couldn't be adopted because they still had birth parents who were alive, but would not give up their parental rights. That meant that the children had to stay in the orphanage until they were 18.

We had been at the orphanage for a few hours when Sister Maurice told us that there was a little girl she wanted us to meet. She took us to the toddler section, where half a dozen two-year-olds were putting on their coats to go outside in the snow. Sister Maurice pointed out Kristina when she walked by. Kristina looked at me and began to cry. That's when I knew she was a smart kid.

Nothing more was said. We returned to Hawaii, very touched by what we had experienced at the orphanage. Then a month later, Sister Maurice contacted us to ask us if we would like to adopt Kristina. We said yes, absolutely. The orphanage had just gotten the release from her birth father so that she could be adopted internationally.

Bureaucracies seem to want to simulate the nine months of pregnancy by requiring nine months of paperwork. We worked with Catholic Charities here in Hawaii, who conducted the necessary investigation of our fitness to be parents. There was also paperwork in Japan that Sister Maurice took care of. By June 1988, we were at Holy Family Home, living at the orphanage for a week. The idea was that we would play with a large group of kids that included Kristina, then a smaller group that included Kristina, and then finally we would have one-on-one time with her. It was a gradual process to make Kristina feel comfortable with us. I loved it. We played, we ate, and we took naps. It was perfect! I didn't want to leave.

But the day came for us to leave the orphanage in Osaka and take Kristina to Tokyo to get her visa from the U.S. Embassy. We needed a visa so we could bring her back to Hawaii for the formal adoption proceedings.

We went to the counter at the U.S. embassy with all our paperwork. The man at the counter turned out to be the number two man at the embassy, the Vice Consul. He looked at our papers and told us to go sit down. We waited an hour or so and then he called us up to the counter. “You have all the paperwork, it’s all correct, but I don’t want to give you the visa,” he said. We were puzzled. If he said that we had missed a form, or had filled out a form incorrectly, we would have understood. But he said all the paperwork was correct.

He told us to go sit down again. We waited another hour, and he called us up once more. It turned out that he was worried about the rights of the Japanese birth mother. She had abandoned her husband and Kristina two years earlier. We had followed all the required legal procedures for advertising in major newspapers to try to find the birth mother, but nobody knew where she was. When there was no response, the Japanese court extinguished her rights, and gave her rights to the birth father, who gave all the rights to us. It was all proper and legal, approved by the Japanese court.

The Vice-Consul made us wait another hour or two, and then he sent us away, telling us to come back the next day. We were very worried. The granting of the visa was supposed to be a mere formality. Now it had become a major problem. We didn’t know what to do, because there didn’t seem to be anything we *could* do— except pray. So we prayed.

That night, we called Sister Maurice back at the orphanage in Osaka, and told her what had happened. She gathered the other nuns and they went to their chapel and lit candles and prayed for us. We couldn’t sleep. This wasn’t supposed to happen. The visa was supposed to be automatic. We had a flight back to Honolulu the next evening, and there were families waiting back home to help us welcome Kristina into her new life in Hawaii.

The next morning, Sister Maurice was on the early train from Osaka to Tokyo with Mr. Agari, the social worker who was managing our case. When the U.S. embassy opened, we were all there, standing at the window again— a nun, a social worker, and me and Elizabeth.

Sister Maurice and Mr. Agari described how all the proper steps had been taken. The Vice-Consul listened and then said, “Well, I’m not going to give you the visa. Put the little girl back in the orphanage.” We just looked at him. We were shocked. “You could appeal to the Japanese Supreme Court,” he added, which was

totally irrelevant. The Japanese court was on our side. It was the Vice Consul of the United States Embassy who was against us.

The Vice-Consul said he would keep our documents in the file. I said I would like our original documents back. He said okay, he would make copies for his files. So he left the window to go and make copies. We went and sat down again for the last time.

That was it. We were stunned. It was over. I don't know how to describe the crushing heaviness that fell upon us. It was hard to breathe. It was hard to think. We had spent seven months praying and looking forward to being with Kristina. Finally, we were with her, and we loved her, and we loved being with her, and we felt that we were already a family. But now we were losing her. She was going to be sent back to the orphanage. It hurt. It really hurt. All we could do was surrender and trust in the Lord. Dear Jesus, your will, not ours, be done. But oh, it hurt! We sat and waited.

After a while the Vice Consul came back and called us to the window one last time. "I'll give you the visa," he said, almost nonchalantly. We were afraid to say anything. We weren't sure we had heard him correctly. What?

The Vice-Consul saw the blank looks on our faces, so he explained. He said that he met one of his colleagues on the way to the copy machine, and told him about the situation. His colleague said that the Japanese people are not litigious, so the birth mother would not sue regarding her rights. There was nothing to worry about. So the Vice Consul changed his mind. He came back to the window to give us the visa.

We don't think the Vice Consul just happened to meet a colleague on the way to the copy machine. We refer to that colleague as an angel, and he intervened just in time. We walked out of the embassy with a huge sense of relief and happiness, grateful to God that we could now bring Kristina back to Honolulu to be part of our family. Thank you, Jesus!

When we brought Kristina to Honolulu, she was almost three years old, and she immediately adjusted to life in Hawaii. Several months later, Elizabeth told me that she and Kristina were taking a bath at home, giggling and laughing, playing and scrubbing each other's backs. When they got out of the tub and were toweling off, Kristina suddenly became very serious and said to Elizabeth, in Japanese,

“Mommy, where were you all this time?” She knew that Elizabeth was supposed to be her mommy all along. It had just taken a while for them to find each other.

By the way, the issue of the birth mother’s rights *was* adjudicated in the court here in Hawaii. The court needed a statement by an expert on Japanese family law. We had a friend in Japan who was a nationally recognized expert on Japanese family law. We had known him for ten years. How likely is it that *anybody* would have a friend who was a nationally recognized expert on Japanese family law? Thank you, Jesus! Our friend wrote a legal opinion, we filed it with the court documents, and the adoption was granted.

### *Romania*

A few years later, Kristina said she would like a little sister, so we decided to adopt again. We had seen reports on TV about the horrible conditions in Romania, where tens of thousands of children— probably more than 100,000 children— were in dire need of help. A local adoption agency here in Hawaii was working with a doctor, a social worker, and a lawyer in Bucharest who were helping people to adopt children there. The agency took our case and gave us hours and hours of briefings to prepare us to go to Bucharest. There were stacks of documents to execute, and it took months.

Finally, in February 1991, we were at the Honolulu International airport headed for Romania. We checked in at Pan Am with 11 suitcases. Some of them had cigarettes, nail polish, and chocolates that we were told to take as gifts for the people who were taking care of the children. We were told that in Romania, almost everyone needed a gift before they would help you. However, most of the suitcases were filled with food, clothing, toys, and medicine for the children. Elizabeth told the Pan Am check-in officer that we were on a medical mission. That was clear from the labels she had put on all our suitcases. They were *big* labels, with big red crosses on them, and the words “Medical Mission.”

The Pan Am check-in officer thought that eleven suitcases was quite a few—about nine more than usual. Elizabeth said it was not for us, it was for children in hospitals and orphanages in Romania. The Pan Am check-in officer finally agreed that he would not charge us for the extra baggage. We were really happy about that until nine months later, when Pan Am went bankrupt. We felt really bad. We thought maybe it was those eleven suitcases. Maybe we should have paid for them.

A short time before we boarded our Pan Am flight for Romania in 1991, the first Gulf War started, and Saddam Hussein called on Islamic Radicals to bomb all things American. There we were, flying on Pan *American*. Also, we had a layover in Zagreb, Croatia, near Romania. The former nation of Yugoslavia was breaking up, and there were concerns that rebels could take over the airport at Zagreb and ground the planes or even harm passengers. Fortunately, they didn't take over the airport or ground our plane or harm any of us passengers during our layover there.

We arrived in Romania 14 months after the former Communist dictator, Ceausescu, had been executed by a firing squad. The country was in transition. However, it was still a communist bureaucracy, because people didn't know how else to behave.

Once in Romania, the medical doctor there took us to hospitals and orphanages to find a child. What we saw was shocking. We went into one room at a hospital where there must have been fifty children in cribs. Most of them were banging their heads against the sides of their cribs for stimulation. They were isolated in their cribs, with no toys for them to play with, and nobody to talk to them or hold them or sing to them. The nurses were out in the lobby playing cards and smoking, ignoring the children.

We found Angela in a hospital in Bucharest, and Spencer in an orphanage in a town named Buzau. We knew that God meant for them to be our children. We knew the first time we saw them.

We had spent months doing the paperwork to bring one child to America, and now we wanted to bring two. After two weeks in Romania, I came back to Hawaii to start the U.S. government paperwork all over again, with the word "two" in the documents instead of the word "one." Elizabeth stayed in Bucharest, in a small apartment she rented from an older Romanian woman. Elizabeth stayed there for two months, fighting the bureaucracy and praying at St. Joseph's Cathedral while I continued to work back in Honolulu.

When the document came back giving us approval to bring two children to the United States, we needed to get the document to Romania as quickly as possible. Just a reminder: it was 1991, before the internet, before email, before smartphones. It was basically the dark ages. In addition, the postal system in Romania was not reliable. That's why we worked with other couples who were going to Romania to adopt children. We served as couriers for each other, carrying documents into the country by hand.

We didn't know when the next couple would head for Romania, and we didn't want to wait, so we had a wild idea. The wild idea was that we would try to fax the approval to Romania. There was only one known fax machine in Bucharest outside of the U.S. embassy itself. It was a fax machine at the Intercontinental Hotel. When Elizabeth asked the hotel staff about it, she was given the fax number but was told that the fax machine was not working. Elizabeth asked if they were going to get it fixed, and the clerk said that they didn't know anyone who could fix it.

Of course, even if the fax machine *did* work, the staff might not remember to put paper in it. Also, we were not guests at the hotel, so the staff would not be responsible for any fax that came to the hotel for us. All in all, it really was a wild idea. But this was the document that authorized us to bring *two* children to America instead of one. This was crucial.

I remember standing in front of the fax machine in my office here in Honolulu early one morning. I carefully inserted the cover sheet and the document into the fax machine, punched in the numbers, said a short prayer, and pushed the button. The machine blinked and hummed.

Nine thousand miles away, behind the counter in the lobby at the Intercontinental Hotel in Bucharest, the lonely fax machine also blinked and hummed. It was alive! It was turned on, it was working, it had paper, and the clerk noticed. He was probably startled to see anything come through. It may have been the first faxed document he had ever seen.

The clerk pulled out the document and did something he didn't have to do—he called Elizabeth at her apartment. When he called, she was at the apartment, which was crucial, because the phone at her apartment did not have a system for recording messages. If she hadn't been there to pick up the phone, she would not have known that the fax had come through. But she was home, she picked up the phone, and learned about the fax.

Elizabeth went to the hotel to get the document, and then convinced the Romanian staff member at the U.S. embassy that a fax was real, and therefore the document was real. Faxes had been around for years, but the embassy staff wasn't sure whether a fax could be accepted as a legal copy of a document. So that was a challenge, but Elizabeth convinced them. Now the embassy in Romania knew that we had approval to bring both Angela and Spencer to America. Thank you, Jesus!

## *Angela*

When we first saw Angela, she was six months old. She was recovering from whooping cough. She had open sores on her body, she had pus coming out of her ears, and she had difficulty breathing. The hospital only gave her rice gruel, so she was under weight. She was bound in a mummy bag, so she couldn't move her legs. Her eyes were glazed over. A nurse at the hospital said Angela was going to die.

We filed the paperwork to adopt Angela, and the court proceedings went forward. While we were waiting, Elizabeth walked several hours each day to visit Angela in the hospital. It was a hard walk, because it was winter. It was below freezing, and the streets were covered with snow and ice. At the hospital, Elizabeth held Angela, massaged her, talked to her, sang to her, and took her to the window to see the tree outside. Gradually, Angela began to respond to Elizabeth. Angela's eyes began to move. Her face changed when Elizabeth spoke to her. She looked up at Elizabeth, her hands clasped together as though she was in prayer.

Then one day, Elizabeth arrived at the hospital to find that Angela's crib was empty. She was told that Angela was so sick that she was in ICU—the intensive care unit. Elizabeth asked to see her, and the Director of the hospital said no. The Director had final authority, and she wouldn't budge. She said that Angela was so sick that she might not survive the trip if we tried to take her to America.

Elizabeth was devastated. Dear God, please! We love this little girl. Please don't let her die. Please let her live so she can be part of our family. Elizabeth knew she had done all she could do. Now it was time to surrender and trust the Lord.

Elizabeth waited at the hospital, unsure what to do next. Then a nurse pulled Elizabeth aside, and in her broken English, explained that Angela would survive. Angela was sick, but the hospital Director put Angela in the ICU in order to take her away from Elizabeth. The hospital Director had accepted a bribe to give Angela to another couple.

There was only one way to stop that from happening. God acted, and three days later, Angela's adoption decree came through. Angela was now legally our daughter. Elizabeth marched to the hospital and confronted the hospital Director. Elizabeth is known as a gentle, friendly, happy person, and she is. But when it

comes to protecting her children, she is a tower of strength. She showed the adoption decree to the Director and demanded custody of Angela immediately. The Director tried to stall, but Elizabeth stood her ground. Finally, the Director yielded. Angela was brought from ICU, and Elizabeth walked through the hospital gates with Angela in her arms. Thank you, Jesus!

Back in her apartment, Elizabeth brought out the powdered Amoxicillin, a penicillin antibiotic that was provided by our doctor in Honolulu. She began to give it to Angela, along with diluted doses of baby formula. Angela had had so little food during her life, that she could not digest regular food. It had to be diluted. But she gradually responded to the food, the medicine, and the love. Her health improved dramatically.

### *Spencer*

Meanwhile, Spencer was in an orphanage at Buzau. He was a year old, and was kept in a crib, wrapped in many layers of clothing. His ears were infected, so he couldn't hear much. He smiled a lot, so occasionally a nurse would pick him up and hold him. He had a stick and a couple of wooden balls hanging inside his crib to play with, but that was it. Sometimes he would pull himself up on one side of the crib. But he was not crawling or walking, because there was no place to crawl or walk to—he was stuck in his crib.

The process of adopting Spencer gave us a different kind of challenge. After we arrived in Romania, the Romanian parliament set up a Commission on Adoptions, which then announced that people could only adopt *one* child. We were already in the process of adopting two. Courts in Bucharest said that the national legislation was defective and would not apply in Bucharest. So Angela was not within the jurisdiction of the Commission, but Spencer was.

Elizabeth had to go before the Commission to get their permission to adopt Spencer. While the Commission could not stop us from adopting Angela, we knew that it might decide to stop us from adopting Spencer when it learned about Angela. That would be a way for them to enforce their policy of restricting couples to only one child.

The time came for Elizabeth to be interviewed by the commissioners to get their approval to adopt Spencer. While waiting for her own interview, she saw more than one woman come out of the Commission office in tears because the Commission had just denied her permission to adopt the child she wanted to adopt.

Others were crouched on the floor, crying, because they had also been denied. You could not appeal a Commission decision. If the Commission said no, that was it.

Finally, Elizabeth was called and was seated in front of the twelve commissioners. She remembers feeling completely at peace, completely calm. It was like being surrounded by the Holy Spirit. All the tension, all the fear, disappeared. It was a time for surrender, a time to trust in the Lord completely.

Elizabeth began by giving the commissioners background information about our family. She showed them a copy of a recent business magazine published in Hawaii. My picture was on the cover. The commissioners seemed to be impressed. By the way, I had never been on the cover of a magazine before, and I have never been on the cover of a magazine since. I was only on a magazine cover when I really *needed* to be on one to impress a group of commissioners in Romania. Thank you, Jesus!

Elizabeth gave the Commissioners the required documents— the financial statement, health statement, and home study. When asked if I also wanted to adopt Spencer, she passed around photos of me taken a few weeks earlier, smiling and holding each child.

When Elizabeth showed the photos to the commissioners, it was clear that we wanted to adopt two children. That was in violation of their new policy.

Elizabeth waited, expecting a commissioner to say: “Why are you trying to adopt two children? You know our policy is to authorize only one. Pick one. You can only adopt one.” But those words never came. The questions ended, and there was a pause. Then the commission clerk turned to Elizabeth and said, “We will be happy to help you.” She began to fill out the authorization form.

There were more challenges, but finally, Elizabeth had custody of both children, and I flew back to Romania to bring them home. Elizabeth did all the hard work, and I showed up for the victory dance. We took our two babies to St. Joseph Cathedral in Bucharest. When we walked into the cathedral, the sun was shining through the stained glass windows above the altar, and the cathedral choir was singing a glorious song. We just stood there and cried and said thank you to the Lord and kissed our babies and kissed each other and lit candles even though we’re not Catholic.

## Conclusion

Fast forward more than 20 years, and here is a photo of our family taken on Father's Day in 2014 [shown on the screen].

Looking at the photo from the left to right, that's me, and then Angela in the yellow. Angela is currently working for Crazy Shirts in Las Vegas. Next is our son, Spencer, who is a professional ballet dancer in the Boston area. Then in black, our oldest daughter, Kristina, who was a preschool teacher and now works for a nonprofit in Michigan that helps people with special needs. Then my mother-in-law, Mrs. Carlson, who helped us raise our children, and my wife, Elizabeth, who is the real hero of our story. Elizabeth is Dr. Elizabeth Keith, Vice Chancellor of Hawaii Tokai International College in Kapolei.

We became closer to God during the adoption of our three children. It was easy for us to see what God was doing in our lives, because the stakes were high, and we were very focused. We knew when we had done all we could do, and it was time to surrender and trust the Lord completely. That's when we saw him remove obstacles and make our paths straight. I think it is harder to be close to God during our daily lives. We can get too busy, too distracted to see what the Lord is doing. We need to focus. We need to pay attention.

The Bible assures us that if we submit to God, God *will* make our paths straight. The Lord *will* remove obstacles from our path. Even when life is hard, our paths can still be straight, because they can still lead us straight to God. We can live the life he wants for us now, and then enjoy the life he wants for us throughout eternity.

God bless you! Thank you!