

O, WHAT A FORETASTE

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By 8:47 on Sunday morning, the church was already beginning to sound like itself.

Not grandly. Not in any way the world would think significant. The first sounds were small ones: the soft complaint of the front door as it swung open and shut, the dull shuffle of dress shoes on entryway tile, the papery rustle of bulletins being unfolded and refolded, a toddler objecting to the moral burden of being carried, the hiss of coffee decanted into a metal urn in the fellowship hall. Somewhere down the corridor a nursery volunteer was unstacking crackers into little paper cups. In the sanctuary, somebody was testing a microphone too gently to be heard by anyone but the first three pews. The pianist had begun touching the opening chords of a hymn, not yet playing it, only feeling his way into it.

Sundays at a local church rarely begin at dramatic points. They begin in fragments. A father with one child under each arm. A college student arriving minutes late and trying to look less rushed than she was. An older man moving carefully down the aisle, touching the backs of pews for balance, passing row after row of families who have not yet learned that every ordinary entrance is a rehearsal for leaving this world well. In the foyer, coats are handed off, diaper bags are redistributed, conversations are resumed from the week before as if the body of Christ had simply inhaled during the week and now, at last, was exhaling.

A MOM

Near the children's check-in table, Deborah Low, who many called Debs, saw a young mother come through the door with the unmistakable look of someone trying to conduct five separate tasks with only two hands. A stroller wheel had caught awkwardly against the threshold. A toddler had already decided to go in the wrong direction. A blanket was slipping off one shoulder. The baby, sensing opportunity, began to cry.

Debs reached forward almost without thinking, catching the mother's diaper bag before it slipped from her shoulder. Then she took the older child by hand and held the door open with her heel, and making enough room for the young mother to breathe again.

The exchange lasted perhaps thirty seconds. To anyone watching, it would have looked like what it was: a small act of church kindness, one more unnoticed mercy in a building full of them. But as soon as Debs steadied the stroller, memory rose in her the way certain hymns do—suddenly, bodily, before language catches up.

There had been years, not so long ago, when her own life had felt like that all the time.

She and her husband had been a family of five with three children under five. On paper it sounded sweet and abundant, the sort of season people preserve in photographs and memorialize later with adjectives like precious. In practice it was love measured in logistics. One child was manageable. Whether it was a doctor's appointment or a daycare drop-off, simply remembering the diaper bag and leaving the house on time got the job done. Two children altered the arithmetic. Three turned even ordinary errands into strategic planning. A pregnancy with a toddler was one thing; a pregnancy with two more children, one of whom refused to sit still in waiting rooms, was another. Her parents lived an hour away and were still working full-time. Help, in the abstract, existed. Help at 10:15 on a Tuesday when one child needed pick-up, another needed watching, and naptime sat over the whole day like a territorial monarch—that was something else.

What she remembers now is not one dramatic rescue but a hundred quiet ones. A young adult from church offered to come sit in the house during nap time so she could take another child somewhere. Another mother

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from church volunteered to drive. A neighbor took the kids to the park. Someone stepped in to play games, keep watch, hold the line. When blood family was too far away for the daily strain, the church became daily family. Not ceremonially. Practically. They loved her children, she says, as though they were their own relatives. Looking back, she can say it with the blunt gratitude of hindsight: there is no way they would have survived those years without the support of the church.

A YOUNG PASTOR

By then the foyer had filled. Names were being exchanged and teenagers were drifting toward the youth room with a dazed velocity. Ryan Choy was coming down the side hallway with a Bible tucked under one arm and a half-buttoned jacket he was still fixing as he walked. He paused to greet a student, answered a question shouted from somewhere near the drinking fountain, then disappeared briefly into a classroom where a few middle-school boys were pretending not to be pleased to see him.

From the outside, he looked at home in the small choreography of ministry, with the practiced ease of a man who knows where the spare pens are kept and which light switch sticks in winter. But the quiet gravity of his presence came from something deeper: he knew, from earlier years, how thin the church can feel when what matters most is missing.

He was raised in Toronto, a city with no shortage of churches and, in his telling, no shortage of confusion either. The forms of church were there, the buildings and traditions and vocabulary. What was harder to find were churches marked by biblical clarity, faithful shepherding, careful preaching, and the kind of spiritual seriousness that can actually sustain a soul. His father had pastored there for decades, and Ryan grew up watching both the cost and the dignity of that labor. He also watched friends and peers grow up in church without receiving the kind of care or scriptural grounding that might have steadied them. He saw sheep who weren't shepherded. Questions went unanswered. Religious depth remained immature. Spiritual thinness left people hungry.

For some, disappointment with the church becomes a reason to keep it at arm's length. For Ryan, it became a vocation. He saw what absence could do. He saw what weak shepherding leaves behind. And somewhere inside that negative space grew a positive longing: to become the kind of faithful shepherd his peers should have had.

Now, years later, he stood in the hallway of a church where children were being checked in, coffee was being poured, and teenagers were asking him the questions his childhood friends had once carried without help. It would have been easy to call that ordinary. To Ryan, it felt more like a prayer answered.

A bell tone sounded softly over the speakers. The low pre-service murmur began to shift. People moved toward the sanctuary in a series of small migrations. Debs found her family's pew. Ryan slipped toward the back after checking once more on his students. The pianist settled into the hymn with more confidence now, and the congregation rose.

A NEW FAMILY

Somewhere between the foyer and the nursery stood another kind of beginning.

Yang and Vivian were still new to the peculiar exhaustion of parenthood, the kind that makes ordinary decisions feel newly moral and newly consequential. A baby rearranges time, but also the scale of ordinary decisions. Small questions begin to feel large. How do we discipline without provoking? How do we affirm our child in a way that builds character rather than vanity? How do we build a home where Christ is woven into our daily routines? In many places, those questions are answered with books, podcasts, or vague encouragement. At church, they were answered by people who knew them too well for vagueness.





Older parents watched the baby. Older couples made room for them. Pastors answered questions not from a safe distance, but with the dangerous intimacy that comes only when people know your patterns, your fears, your vanities, your blind spots. Advice that personal can feel almost invasive—unless it is given in love, by people who have earned the right to speak directly. And in a church like this, Yang and Vivian learned, sin does not hide very long. Pride does not stay abstract. Impatience shows up in tone. Fear disguises itself as prudence. Self-will dresses itself as wisdom. But because they were known, they were also helped.

They did not simply need correct principles. They needed fathers and mothers who walked with them. They needed young students who could hold the baby for an hour, wise elders who answered a difficult question, and honest pastors to tell the truth closely enough that it touched the actual grain of their lives.

A STUDENT

Into that same room, came not a mother or a pastor, but a college student who had once come through those same doors alone.

I entered that church that way—alone, though looking back now I can see I had not come there alone at all. Looking back, I was saved. I did not yet have language sturdy enough to say that plainly, but grace had already been at work beneath the floorboards of my life. I came because I wanted to, or at least because I told myself I wanted to. Christianity had already been built into the architecture of my life for years before that. Its habits were familiar. Its language was gentle. Even the expectations I had inherited from that world could masquerade as conviction. But there is a difference between being surrounded by a thing and being seized by it. A difference God taught me simply through a gathering I'd done hundreds of times before: worship.

When the congregation stood to sing, I remember feeling it before I could explain it. The hymn was old, older than my instincts, older than my tastes, older than the music I would have chosen for myself. I had never heard some of those songs before. And yet when the room sang them, it seemed to know what my soul had been trying to say before I knew how to speak it.

RISE TOGETHER

So by the time the congregation stood to sing, the room held more than one story of longing: the mother who had been carried by a church family, the young pastor shaped by the ache of its absence, the family with a newborn baby girl, and the student who entered alone and did not yet know he was being gathered in.

Debs knew that sound from the years when the church had quietly carried her family—through rides, childcare, naps, and the small mercies by which tired

mothers are kept from going under. Ryan knew it from the opposite direction, from the ache of thin churches and the long desire for something truer, sturdier, more faithful. Yang and Vivian knew the sound while discovering that parenthood had driven them not into self-sufficiency but into dependence—on pastors, on older saints, on the hard kindness of being known well enough to be corrected. I knew it as the student who walked in alone and found, in the old hymns of strangers, that grace had already been speaking before I knew how to answer. We came with different lacks, but when the congregation rose, the lacks did not vanish so much as gather into one song.

The room was imperfect enough to be believable: a child somewhere singing blissfully off-key, men reaching too low or too loud, women carrying the melody, older saints barely above a whisper, and babies wailing in the background as if they, too, meant to contribute. Yet the congregation sang, not waiting for perfection. The melody takes what is cracked and ordinary and folds it into harmony. For a few minutes the room sounded like more than itself—a hall of angels.

Maybe that is why the small joys of the Christian life always carry a sting. They are sweet, but not sufficient. The kindness that keeps a weary mother afloat, the faithful shepherd who answers a question in the hallway, the old hymn that suddenly feels like home—each is real, and each leaves the heart wanting more. Scripture gives that ache a generous name: we have the firstfruits of the Spirit; we have tasted and seen that the Lord is good; we have even tasted the powers of the age to come. But firstfruits are not the harvest. A pledge is not the whole inheritance. Bread and wine are not yet the banquet. God has a habit of taking ordinary things—our voices, tears, bread, borrowed hands—and adorning them with promise. He makes the joy real enough to strengthen us, and partial enough to keep us from mistaking this life for home.

THE BENEDICTION: A BLESSING

Dissatisfaction is not the enemy of our faith. Sometimes it is faith telling the truth. The minor joys and the aches we endure reveal that our hearts have begun to learn where their treasure truly belongs. Every clean joy becomes a kind of homesickness. Every lyric sung, every chord that rings, every confession that tugs at the soul is not a rival to Christ, but a signpost toward His glory. The best moments in this world do not close desire; they consecrate it. The moments where our hearts relax, or when our tears rejoice, tell us what is good here will not simply be thrown away, but gathered, purified, redeemed, and made full in His presence.

This was not the feast, only its fragrance in the hallway. And for pilgrims, sometimes that is enough to keep walking toward home.

Then the service ends; the benediction is spoken. Chairs shift. Children reappear all at once. People collect jackets, cups, and half-folded bulletins. Debs bends to help another mother. Ryan stays behind with a student. The room returns to coffee rings, carpet, and fluorescent light. But something lingers in the ear. The week ahead will still ask for its fatigue, its errands, its griefs. Yet they leave with the same quiet knowledge: this was not the feast, only its fragrance in the hallway. And for pilgrims, sometimes that is enough to keep walking toward home.

We walk out, and behind us the pianist is still turning over the melody of the song we just sang together. Blessed Assurance, Jesus is Mine. O, What a Foretaste of Glory Divine. ❖

Gabriel is a Junior studying computer science with a concentration in machine learning and computer systems, but he also loves to write. Gabriel is a ML researcher in SAIL and is an avid cooker, movie streamer, and IM soccer/football player. He is a member at Redeemer Bible Fellowship in Mountain View which inspired this piece. Gabriel is also a leader in Christian Union and Veritas.