



Episode 66: Don't Let the Ending Define the Whole Story

I'm Emily P. Freeman and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to Episode 66.

Each week here I share a short reflection, a thoughtful prayer, and a simple next right step for anyone who might feel overwhelmed with decisions, big or small.

As we collectively look ahead into what this new year might bring, the truth is that for some of us, the new year has brought us to an ending of some things: a difficult goodbye, a painful parting, an honest admission that things just aren't working out — with a job, a person, a role, or a project.

Whether this new parting is something you chose or something placed upon you by circumstance, it might be tempting to either rush past this painful ending to the next thing or to wallow in shame, discouragement, or heartbreak over how it ended.

Rather than ignoring it or perseverate over what went wrong, today, I want to suggest a third way: let's take back the narrative. The ending does not get to define the whole story. This could be a life-giving part of your healing. This could be your next right thing.

Listen in.

Travel with me for a moment to 2 years ago. It's the summer of 2017 and we've gone to Memphis to visit John's grandmother on her birthday. She's turning 104.

Since I married John, I've only known her as Budder, a nickname started decades ago by one of John's cousins who tried to say Grandmother and it came out *Budder* — that's with two d's, by the way like Buddy, except it's Budder.

We sit with her poolside on a hot fourth of July and, as tends to happen when we're with her, John begins to ask her a handful of questions about her life and the conversation gently leads back to the Lord.

It always does with Budder.

To understand her, it's good to know a little bit of her story.

Once when we asked her what Presidents she remembered, she starting thinking back. "Well let's see. I remember President Wilson . . ." and while she rattled off a few more, I immediately had to Google the dates of Wilson's term: 1913 – 1921.

She was born in 1913, barely a year after the Titanic sank and only a year before World War I began.

She's always been delighted to share about her life even as she honestly doubts it's very interesting. Like the time she told us almost as an afterthought about when Elvis used to ask the football coach at the local high school if he would turn the stadium lights on at night so he and his friends could throw the football around.

"So if you drove by the stadium late at night and see those lights on," she'd say, "you'd know Elvis was in there playing ball with his friends." Well, alright, then.

That summer of 2017, if you asked someone about Budder they would say she loves her family, she prays for each one of us by name every day, she volunteers in her community, she teaches Sunday School to 1st and 2nd graders at her church, and is happiest when she is simply in the room with those she loves. Budder is famous if only in her own community and our family simply by being herself.

Of course, I can't possibly sum up over a hundred years of her life. I can't point you to a cool website, an impressive bio, or a slick headshot (although in her younger years she actually looked alot like Maggie Gyllenhaal if you ask me).

As we sat there with her by the pool, we didn't ask her about waiting, but evidently, it's something she thinks about a lot on her own.

She said, “Everyday I get such a pleasure and a strengthening from a little verse that says, *His steps are with you*. What I’m trying to make myself do is remember that little verse that says, *Wait on the Lord*.”

As she spoke, I recorded some of our conversation on video and that afternoon, I shared some of that conversation we had with Budder on my Instagram stories. I received more messages from this short series of videos of Budder talking than I’ve ever received when I’ve shared stories on Instagram, *hundreds* of messages from you, responding to her words.

I’ve since wondered about why that simple conversation resonated with so many of us.

First, you have to know that in the summer of 2017, she was hard to resist.

She was quick-witted, remarkably present. She lived by herself, drove herself to church and to the Walmart, taught Sunday school like a miracle, or a unicorn. Or both, I guess.

Her husband died of a stroke when he was only 54, leaving her to parent their four boys alone. Budder never remarried, living on her own for the next 55 years. The sorrow she has she carries in secret and if she ever held grudges, she released them decades ago.

I look at her life, this woman who has buried both a husband and a now a son, John’s dad. She’s lived through two World Wars, saw the election of eighteen presidents with all of their triumphs and scandals.

She has lived long and she has lived faithful.

I think that’s what you saw in her on those Instagram stories.. Yes, it’s her personality, her southern accent, and her humor. But mostly, it’s her faith.

We are a generation of tired people, longing to see evidence that what we wait for in secret is worth it.

We believe and yet we want help in our unbelief.

Our souls make quiet work of always scanning for truth. When we find it, the tears spill over and take us by surprise.

Down the road from Budder's is a house that over 20 million people have visited since it opened to the public: Graceland, the Memphis home of Elvis Presley.

I could tell you about the mirrored staircase, the peacock stained glass in the living room, the oddly delightful jungle room, the spotless 1970's kitchen, but since over 20 million people have visited that house, chances are you've seen all that yourself or at least you've heard all about it.

What struck me while walking through the house where Elvis lived is, how in spite of all his achievements, all of his awards, money, accolades, and success, he still died in his upstairs bathroom, young, sick, exhausted, and alone.

Budder was born twenty-two years before Elvis and lived forty years passed his death. His whole life fits inside hers two and a half times.

But when you put aside the legend and pull back the tasseled curtain of the American dream, you'll see a man who wanted what we all want: to be loved, to be secure, and to belong.

No one is immune to this. Just some of us have more money, talent, and creative ways of trying to get what we most deeply long for.

A few miles away from Graceland, Budder's small house sits on the corner in a quiet neighborhood. For years she lived there alone, praying daily for her family, living faithfully in the ways she knew how. Hers was a life of waiting. For what exactly, I don't presume to know. But I know she thought about it. I also know she brought her waiting into the presence of the Lord.

As we talked that day, one line she shared I remember. As she shared about her morning Bible Study, "And then the one this morning, said *the Lord shall take you step by step and supply all your needs*. That's the first thing I do when I wake up. I turn the little light on and read that verse."

As she spoke, she looked off into the distance. I have it on video. Then she drew one of her hands up toward her face and smiled. Like a little girl. A 104 year old girl.

On the cold morning of January 12, 2018, I was on a volleyball trip with one of our girls when I got a call from John.

“I have some sad news,” he said, “Budder passed away.”

The news of her passing at first felt familiar like I had imagined this moment so many times it almost felt like a memory.

Budder wasn't sick but she was, after all, 104.

But something in John's voice told me there was more, a heavy comma hanging in the air between us. And that's when he said it.

“There was a fire.”

Instantly, I regretted my initial acceptance of her passing, I grabbed it back like a greedy toddler.

A fire? After all this time of living? Absolutely not. This is unacceptable.

For days after this conversation with John, I tried to re-create it in my mind.

How did he say it exactly?

Did he say there was a fire? Or did he say there was a *house* fire? Why did he say *passed away* and not *died*?

It shouldn't matter exactly how he phrased it, but it did for some reason.

That was one year ago this week.

After 104 years of healthy and faithful living, it's painful to tell you she died in a house fire. We believe the Lord was with her in her final moments and received her with tenderness and great joy.

That's what we eventually came to, anyway. But in the weeks and months following her death, as a family, we grappled with the unknown reality of her final moments. Why did it have to end that way?

What is the point of that?

Scripture doesn't say so much about waiting for particular things, outcomes, or circumstances.

Instead, we get this from Psalm 37:

“The steps of a man are established by the Lord,
And He delights in his way.
When he falls, he will not be hurled headlong,
Because the Lord is the One who holds his hand.
I have been young and now I am old,
Yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken
Or his descendants begging bread.
All day long he is gracious and lends,
And his descendants are a blessing.”

And also this from Psalm 27:14

“Wait for the Lord; be strong and let your heart take courage. Yes, wait for the Lord.”

This is the Word of the Lord.

Of course, our Father would shift our eyes from a plan we hope for to a Person we can hope in. Isn't that what he always does? Isn't that what Budder said?

Budder lived her life in a posture of waiting for the Lord. She talked about it, read about it and repeated scripture about it, and brought it up over and over again.

For her, to live was to wait. What about for us?

Here's what I know: Whatever I put at the center of the wait is what carries all the power. I can't say that I fully understand what it means to wait upon the Lord but if scripture invites me into it, well then there must be hope in that.

Here's what else I know: Budder had 104 beautiful, faithful years and one tragic morning that, in the truest reality, ended up being the most glorious morning of her whole long life.

But the ending alone does not get to define the whole story.

Several years ago, when Budder turned 100, her local news station featured her when she was retiring from her 29 year volunteer post as a pink lady at the hospital.

That story ended up being seen and shared by hundreds of thousands of people online. It's remarkable only because it was so regular. It wasn't necessarily the things that she did, it was the way in which she did them, morning after faithful morning.

At the end of the feature, the final clip shows Budder walking away from the camera with two workers by her side at the hospital. And in those final moments, you can hear her say, "I want *y'all* to be interviewed!"

And that was Budder's life - always thinking of others, delighted to be in their company.

When things end, our hearts might break, especially when the ending is unexpected, unfair, or unexplainable. The ending is a part, but it isn't the whole. Don't let the ending steal the narrative.

If you're walking through an ending right now, might you be willing to name not only the pain of the ending but also perhaps the joy of the beginning?

Before this season of good-bye, what hellos were you able to say?

Because of this person, this project, this job or endeavor, in what ways did you become more fully yourself?

How were you able to grow into yourself in ways you might not have done otherwise?

Where did you see God?

As we remember our beginnings and release those last good-byes may we:

“Wait for the Lord; may we be strong and let our hearts take courage. Yes, may we wait for the Lord.”
Psalm 27:14

Thanks for listening to Episode 66 of The Next Right Thing.

I know this one may have been a difficult one to get through so I thank you for hanging with me. While endings are usually sad, particularly when we are saying goodbye to those we love, I also think it's important to not let the ending always get the final say.

Thanks for being willing to walk with me through your own endings, for considering an alternative narrative to the story you're telling yourself, and for starting to get curious about how God might be showing up for you in ways you might not have been looking for.

As we continue the conversation, you can always find me @emilypfreeman on Instagram or at emilypfreeman.com and just a reminder we always have transcripts of our episodes available at thenextrightthingpodcast.com. Just click on the episode you are looking for, scroll to the bottom and click the button that says Download Transcript.

Speaking of the podcast, some good news, last week we reached another milestone - 2 Million downloads!

In a fun play on words, my 3rd book, A Million Little Ways is on sale right now for only 1.99, that's the ebook for Kindle and Nook. Some places it's only 1.59! So we'll celebrate 2 Million Downloads in a million little ways. Get it?

While we're on a celebratory note, I want to leave you with words from Budder's life in her own words, two of the quotes I shared in this episode.

She would be delighted to say them directly to you if she could and then she would turn around and ask you about your life. To close us out, here's Budder sharing a few words about waiting on the Lord. May it be an encouragement to you as much as it has been an encouragement to us.

“Everyday I get such a pleasure and a strengthening from a little verse that says, *His steps are with you*. What I'm trying to make myself do is remember that little verse that says, *Wait on the Lord*.” “And then the one this morning, said *the Lord shall take you step by step and supply all your needs*. That's the first thing I do when I wake up. I turn the little light on and read that verse.”

Thanks for listening and I'll see you next time.