

From a  
**Cardboard Box**  
to a  
**College President**





Despite the cold winter, the family lived in daily anticipation. They were awaiting the arrival of the newest addition.

Ophir and Velma were dryland farmers raising a family of seven. Their oldest was already in heaven, having lost a battle to leukemia at five years old. They had taken Ophir's mother in a few years earlier. She was in bad health, needed constant care, and they willingly gave it.

The family of ten lived in a 1,200 square foot house. It was on 20 acres about 20 miles east of Pueblo, Colorado. A wood stove was both a place to cook and the family's only heat source. There was no running water. Ophir dug a cistern and water was delivered once a week. Milk came directly from the cow, eggs came from the chickens out back, and pinto beans were readily available. Potatoes and flour were purchased in bulk once or twice a year. Pigs, chickens, wild game, and "occasion purchases" of beef supplied protein along



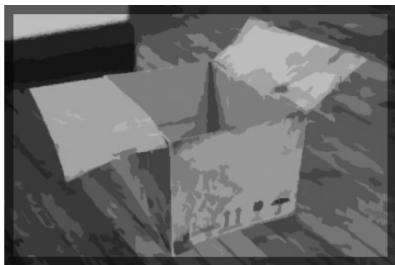
the way. To make ends meet, Ophir worked long hours on the farm and as a crane operator in Pueblo.

January of 1968 was a month of expectation. While the Ballards were already known as a large family, Velma was expecting the arrival of their ninth child. Six and a half years earlier, Mike came into the family; most thought he would be the last. However, Ophir and Velma left these things in God's hands and were delighted to share the expectation with the rest of the family. No one wondered where the baby would sleep or how another mouth could be fed. Each member joyfully awaited the new sibling's arrival.

On January 18, 1968 Mark Henry Ballard was born at Parkview Episcopal Hospital in Pueblo. By the time Velma and Mark were released from the hospital, Velma had turned 45. Velma walked by faith, lived joyfully, and never complained about what the family did not have. She simply did the best she could with what they had. Her joy set the tone for the family, even though they were poor and lived a very simple life. The children all report, "We never knew we were poor. We thought we were just like everyone else."

When Ophir and Velma brought Mark home, a decision had to be made. "Where will Mark sleep?"

Velma pulled out a drawer and set Mark on the soft cushion of her cloths. She then took a cardboard box, some material, and batting she had been saving. She quickly made a mattress to fit the bottom of the box. She used the remaining material to cover the box and made some ruffles around the top. It looked as good as a store-bought bassinet. Mark was transferred from the drawer to his first bed, a tastefully decorated cardboard box. The family welcomed him into the world and into the loving Ballard home.



## **October 28, 2013**

A little more than 45 years later, Mark Ballard stood before the students, staff, faculty, and trustees of the Northeastern Baptist College in Bennington, Vermont, to be inaugurated as the new college's first president. The inauguration date was strategically chosen. It commemorated the day, October 28, 2009,

exactly four years earlier, when Mark stood beside his wife Cindy, his son Ben, and his sister and brother-in-law, Sherrill and Harvey Coberley at the gravesite of D. L. Moody. They contemplated Moody's educational ventures. They prayed together, and Mark committed himself to founding a new college in New England.

Leaving Moody's gravesite in Northfield, Mark began planning as they drove back to Londonderry, NH. Over the next few months a team of prayer partners and advisors joined Mark in the planning. In March of 2010 a non-profit organization, Project Launch 13 (PL13), held its first board meeting. The organization's purpose was to launch the new college in August 2013. On Sunday evening, March 28th, a Vision Meeting was held at Christian Fellowship Baptist Church, where Mark publicly announced the plans for the new college. Twelve years earlier he and Cindy had started this church and now he was giving his resignation. The last Sunday of May was his last day as pastor.

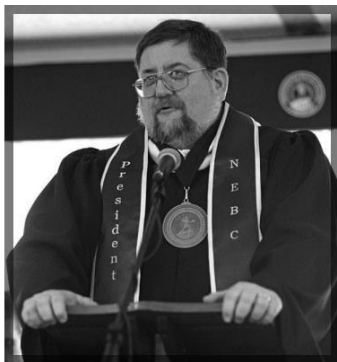
While Mark, Cindy, and Ben were certainly better off financially than Mark's parents had been at his birth, they did not have much. Most of their married life Mark and Cindy planted churches or served

smaller congregations. Every move they made, but one, offered either no salary or less salary than their previous position. What little savings they had managed to put away had been spent a few years earlier to adopt Ben, a special needs boy from China. Knowing they would receive no more paychecks, likely for several years, Mark thought he should take stock of their financial status on that last Sunday morning of May 2010.

While Cindy and Ben prepared for church, Mark went to the home computer. He went online to their bank account. He checked their savings account and wrote the total on a piece of paper. He then looked at their checking account and wrote the balance on the paper. Finally, he emptied his pockets, added it up, and put the total on the paper. Mark added the three figures and it came to a grand total of \$47.00.

Two weeks later PL13 moved into its first office in Concord, NH, with two full time employees, willing to work with or without pay, and two retired volunteers. Over the next four years the initial academic program, the faculty and staff, organizational structure, a building to house classrooms, offices, and

a chapel, along with another building that housed the library, were all brought together. Eight full-time and 34 part-time and audit students enrolled for classes at Northeastern Baptist College (NEBC) in



August 2013. One year later the college achieved Vermont state accreditation and degree granting authority.

On May 18, 2019 NEBC held its fourth graduation. The college continues to grow, training students





to make a difference in the Northeast by exhibiting the *Mind of a Scholar*, the *Heart of a Shepherd*, and the *Perseverance of a Soldier*. The college offers both associate and bachelor's degrees in biblical studies, Christian counseling, Christian education and business. At this writing, Mark is leading the college through a seven-year emphasis to expand its reach with the theme of *Forming the Framework for the Future*.

## **From a Cardboard Box To a College President**

Often I am asked, "How did you go from a cardboard box in Colorado to a college presidency in Vermont?" Having given the question quite a bit of thought, I now realize my dad's outsized contribution. His influence formed me into the man I am today.

Many people, born into humble means like myself, tend to remain in that humble state. A dad can make all the difference in the accomplishments of his children. In my case, that is certainly true.

Dad's largest impact on my journey from a cardboard box to a college president was through five life principles he lived and taught. When Cindy and I worked as houseparents at a Baptist children's home in Texas, I tried to instill the principles in the 40 boys under our care. Through our years of ministry in Texas, North Carolina, Virginia, Florida, New Hampshire, and Vermont, I have purposely passed the principles on to multiple young men. When we adopted Benjamin in 2005, I began instilling them in my son. My dad did not live to see his grandson Benjamin, but through his life-principles, he is a dominant influence in Ben's life. Now it is my joy to live and teach Dad's life-principles before the young men at Northeastern Baptist College. I believe his principles can help you on your life journey as well.

### ***Work Hard***

First, both by example and instruction, Dad taught me to work hard. I still hear Dad's voice quoting his favorite phrase from the 4th Commandment: "Six days shall you labor and do all your work." For him it was a Divine command, not a useful cliché.

Dad worked hard whether on the farm, in the yard, or operating his crane. He worked double shifts whenever possible. He took joy in his work and he did all he could to teach each of his children to work hard and rejoice in the opportunity. He assigned chores for each of us to do at home. When we took outside jobs, he emphasized that we do them well.

When I was fourteen, I spent a week with a sister. Her husband came home at lunch time on Monday. Paul worked for a pipeline construction company and was building fence on a ranch in eastern Colorado. That morning his small crew of three had all quit. He said, "Mark, I know you are here for a vacation, but would you be willing to help me build fence this week." I quickly agreed. At the end of the week Paul introduced me to the owner of the company. He thanked me for helping out and handed me my first paycheck. When I got home, I showed it to my Dad. "I thought I was volunteering," I said. "I felt weird about taking the check."

Dad said, "Did you work hard?"

"Yes."

"Did you do your best?"

“Yes Sir!”

He then said something I will never forget. “Mark, whenever someone gives you a job to do, work hard. Do your best. If they pay you, take the check. But if you receive a paycheck and didn’t work hard or do your best, give it back and apologize!” Dad taught me to work hard.

## *Survive*

Dad was a World War II veteran. He was a marksman in the famed 36th Infantry of the 5th Army. He fought against Rommel in North Africa. He fought in Sicily. He fought up the boot of Italy, into Rome, and beyond. At one point every officer near him was killed or MIA. He was a private, but he took command when no one else would. He led a group of men to continue to the fight. Five days out of Rome, he was severely wounded. Refusing treatment, he insisted that others be rescued first. Finally, he was carried off the battlefield and spent the next year recovering.

Throughout his life, Dad faced disappointment and discouragement. He faced trials and tragedies, yet he never complained. He survived and he

thrived, taking care of others along the way.

Dad not only taught me to survive by example, he intentionally instructed me in survival. He taught me to do whatever it takes to survive. Not only did he teach me to make repairs on the house, vehicles, and equipment, he taught me how to survive in other ways as well. Dad taught me how to fish and how to handle a gun. He taught me how to track wild game, clean, skin, and butcher what was taken on the hunt. He taught me how to prepare a shelter and sleep on the ground in the cold Rocky Mountains of Colorado. He taught me how to spend the night sleeping on a tree limb without falling to the ground. He taught me how to find my way when I was lost in the woods after dark with no flashlight. In short, he taught me how to survive with joy, no matter what life throws at me.

### ***Share with Others***

Dad never had much but he was generous. Some thought he was generous to a fault, but his example influenced and inspired many others—especially me. He was always ready and willing to share the little he had. He often said, “If I have only a

pound of meat and someone is in need, I must give them half. My needs will be met.” Those were not just words to my Dad. I observed him living this principle his entire life.

Everyone else had left home. It was just Dad, Mom, and I. I was a teenager. Dad had been laid off work for over a year. It was one of the leanest times of my growing up years. I was twelve or thirteen years old. For me to attend a private school, my Dad made a deal for me to work as a janitor for the school. In exchange, I received tuition and books. Even so, with little income, we were barely surviving.

One day Dad picked me up from school. On the way home we saw a man hitchhiking. Dad pulled over to give him a ride. As he stepped into the truck, Dad asked where he needed to go. He was headed several miles in the opposite direction, so Dad agreed to take him. Sitting in the middle of the bench seat, I could see the gas gauge was close to empty and getting closer.

As Dad drove and talked to the man, I watched the gas gauge with special interest. When we arrived at the man’s house, he opened his wallet and pulled out a \$20. Relief filled my mind. I happened to

know Dad had only \$5 and didn't know from where the next dollar would come. Dad surprised me when he said, "No. Keep that money. You will need it. I didn't give you a ride for money. I gave you a ride to help you."

On the drive home, I was no longer watching the gas gauge. I was deep in thought. Finally I said, "Dad, I don't understand. You have \$5. You don't know where the next dollar is coming from. You're almost out of gas. You drove that man at least 10 miles out of our way. When he offered you money, you refused it. This just doesn't make sense!"

After a few moments of silence Dad responded, "Mark, God has promised to meet our needs and He taught us to be available to help others. That man needed a ride. While he was in the truck, I was able to tell him how to have a relationship with God. We were able to share God's love with the man and meet his physical need. There is no way I could take pay for that. God's gift cost Him everything, but it is free to us and to everyone who will receive it. We were able to share that good news and demonstrate it at the same time. Don't worry about our needs. God will take care of us."

Dad taught me to hold everything I have with an open hand. He taught me to always be ready to share with others. He taught me one of the most valuable lessons of my life—I can trust God to meet my needs.

### ***Enjoy a Real Relationship with God***

Dad taught me how to have a real relationship with God. I am not talking about religion. I am not even talking about going to church, though we attended church regularly. I am talking about having a real, vibrant, growing, personal relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ. When my Dad prayed, you knew he was talking directly to the Creator of the universe. He talked to God like He was his best friend.

I remember hearing my dad talk to God when he didn't know I was listening. I remember his prayers at the dinner table and at night before we headed off to bed. I remember when on occasion the pastor would ask my Dad to close a church service in prayer. Whenever Dad prayed, I knew he was talking directly to God and expecting God to hear and answer his prayer. Dad not only taught us about God by example,



he intentionally looked for opportunities to tell us about God. He read the Bible to us. He sang songs about God. He engaged us in those songs. It was obvious that he was not a “religious man”; he was a man who had a real relationship with God.

Through Dad’s example and instruction, I came to realize that he had a relationship with God that I did not have. I wanted what he had. But I knew there was a big problem. God is holy, righteous, and just. He must punish sin. I knew I was a sinner, so I was in BIG TROUBLE. But Dad also taught me that Jesus loved me so much that He came to earth, was tempted like all of us, but because He is God’s eternal Son, He never sinned Himself. Despite His own perfection, Jesus died a sinner’s death. But He did it as my substitute. In fact, He died for every single person who had ever lived or ever will live. He died in my place, taking the punishment for my sin upon Himself. Guess what. He also died for you!

After His death, Jesus was placed in a borrowed tomb. Three days later Jesus defeated sin, death, and the grave. He rose again! That’s right! He came back to life after three days in the grave. The punishment for sin had been paid. The victory had

been won. God's forgiveness was now available to everyone who would turn from their sin and trust Jesus. Jesus said it this way, "He that believes on Me, has everlasting life." (John 6:47)

Dad did not have a relationship with God because he earned it or deserved it. Often I heard him say, "Lord, be merciful to me a sinner." Dad had a relationship with God because Jesus died for him, was buried, and rose again the third day. Dad had a relationship with God because he trusted Jesus to forgive his sins and be his Lord and Savior. Jesus Christ gave him a real relationship with God the Father.

After wrestling with God about my own sins for two years, I too entered a relationship with God. I trusted Jesus Christ to be my Lord and Savior, and He has never left me or forsaken me.

How about you? Do you have a real relationship with God? Is it personal and genuine? If not, you can have that relationship today. How?

Do you realize that, because of your sin, you do not deserve a relationship with God? It is a gift offered to you by Jesus Christ. Will you stop trying to earn what you cannot earn? Do you believe Jesus, God's eternal Son, died in your place, was buried, and

rose again? If so, then don't wait another minute. Turn to God in prayer and tell Him so. You can put it in your own words, or you can use the sample prayer below.

*Dear God, I know that I have sinned and do not deserve a relationship with you. But God, I believe that You love me. I believe You sent Jesus to die in my place, taking the penalty for my sin. Jesus, right now, I turn from my sin and I trust you to forgive me. I trust you to give me a real relationship with God the Father right now, to be my Lord, my Savior, and my Guide throughout this life, and to one day take me to heaven to spend eternity with you. Thank you, Jesus for saving me from my sin. In Jesus' name I offer this prayer, Amen.*

The words of that prayer are not magic, but the Bible's promise is clear. If that is the decision of your heart and mind today, you have just been born into God's forever family. He will never leave you. He will never forsake you. You now have an everlasting relationship with God. To learn more about how to grow in your new relationship you can contact me

using the information at the end of this little booklet, or you can find a good Bible teaching church in your area.

Quite honestly, this is the most important thing my Dad ever taught me. In fact, it is the most important thing I could ever share with my own son. Dads, whatever else you teach your children, do not ignore this invaluable truth. The Bible is clear. Those who trust Jesus will spend eternity in God's presence. They will go to heaven the moment they die. But those who do not turn to Jesus in faith will spend eternity separated from God in hell.

Whether or not you care about your eternity, I know you care about your children. You do not want your children to suffer eternity in hell. Statistics are clear. Parents who personally trust Jesus, who have a growing relationship with God, have a far better chance of seeing their own kids turn to Jesus than those who simply tell them about God. My Dad taught me to have a relationship with God both by his example and by his instruction.

Trust Jesus! Follow Jesus! Teach your kids about Jesus!

## ***Live for Something Bigger than Yourself***

Finally, Dad often told us kids, “Remember who you are. Remember where you came from. Remember you are not home yet.” With this simple reminder, he urged us to live for something bigger than ourselves, something bigger than the moment.

Dad knew that life is full of trials and hardships. Though he and Mom did their best to shield us from the brunt of the storms, they never hid the fact that life is full of trouble.

You can work hard, do your best to survive, and thrive, and yet lose everything you own in this world. It happened to our family—more than once.

Dad taught me that if you live for prosperity or popularity, for fame or fortune, you have set yourself up for disappointment. But if you live for a cause greater than yourself, you will not only be able to deal with disappointment, you will accomplish something that lasts for eternity.

Dad taught me to consider myself a stranger and a pilgrim on this earth. He taught me to look “for a city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.” (Hebrews 11:10) Dad taught me to desire “a better, that is, a heavenly country.” He also taught

that those who live for eternity, rather than for this life, are assured, “God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them.” (Hebrews 11:16) Dad taught me that no matter my circumstances in this life, I should obey God and follow His leading. He taught me to find out what God wants me to do in this life and do it, or die trying. He taught me that if I lived my life with these assurances and commitments, no matter my circumstances, one day I would stand before God and hear Him say, “Well done, My good and faithful servant.” (Luke 19:17)

## **Conclusion**

How did I go from a cardboard box to a college president? One step at a time. All along my journey I attempted to follow Ophir James Ballard’s five crucial life-principles. I learned them both from his lips and his life.

Dad was not perfect. Certainly, I am far from perfection. I’ve made a lot of mistakes along the way. My resources are few. At times they have been non-existent. But I have a relationship with the God of the universe. He loves me, He guides me, and He

empowers me to live each day, not for this life, but for the next.

I have no idea what journey you are on today. But I know that wherever you find yourself you can get from where you are, to where God intends for you to be, if you will trust Jesus, live for Him, and follow the other principles outlined in this little booklet.

If I can help you on your journey, please let me know. Below you will find my contact information. If I can help you, I will. If not, I will try to connect you to someone who can help you on your journey.

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