

40 Years of Faithfulness: Our Story



Bro. Ricky Cunningham

Matthew 13:1–9

I have been asked this morning to remind all of us of our story here at Hardin. Some of you have been here longer than 40 years and some of us have come in along the way in the last 40 years, so I just want to take a moment and talk about our story because it is a God story and we get to be a part of what God is doing through His church. I believe the passage of Scripture this morning speaks loudly about us. It's a familiar passage of Scripture and it has always resonated with me because you guys know I was raised on a farm and that I love the farm, so this is one of my favorite teachings of Jesus. Now, I'm going to take it just a little bit out of context but I'm not preaching it I just want you to listen to it, and as we listen to this, we know it's talking about a person's response to the gospel. You are either hard soil, rocky soil, thorny soil, or good soil; I want that to be the context. As a church, a collection, a group of people, the body of Christ—I want you to think about which one you think Hardin is. Listen to what Jesus taught.

Scripture

"That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. And great crowds gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat down. And the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: 'A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. He who has ears, let him hear.'"

Our story is not going to begin on the first Sunday of May 1983, but I'm going to back up a few years and share a few things that maybe you didn't know about our story as a church. It really starts in the summer of 1980. On July 18, 1980, Celisa and I got married. After falling in love with her, I will never forget having to share with her what I knew God was doing in my life; He was calling me to preach His Word. Being reared in the church I was reared in, in Western Kentucky, there was only one option if you were called to preach God's Word, and that was to become a pastor of a church. I had no problem preaching God's Word, but I really didn't want to pastor a church.

See, I was raised in a patriarchal church. We never had a pastor for more than two to three years, tops. If he left voluntarily, that meant another church called him, a bigger church. My church always talked about how pastors always only preach for money and they always go to a bigger church, nobody ever goes to a smaller church. Now, if they didn't like a pastor, my granddaddy and the other granddaddies would get together, they would invite other people, and they would have a prayer meeting. God would always answer that prayer because the next Sunday the preacher would get up and resign. Now, I had no idea that somebody had probably

told the pastor about the prayer meeting; I just thought God answers the prayers of those granddaddies who don't like pastors! So can I be honest with you? Being a farm kid, would you want to be one of those? Absolutely not! I tried to get lost so I could get saved, because if I was lost that meant God wasn't calling me to preach! I had a horrible three years, from sixteen to nineteen years old. So I will never forget the night I had to tell Celisa that God was calling me to preach and I would have to surrender one day. I thought nobody would want to marry a guy who going to have to do what I was going to have to do. She married me anyway! Praise the Lord; on July 18, 1980, we got married.

Now, it just so happened that at the time our pastor was a former member of Hardin Baptist Church. He had been called to preach and my home church, Ledbetter Baptist Church, was his first church to pastor. Well, Hardin Baptist Church always had a revival in August, so we loaded up a bus and drove from Ledbetter Baptist Church in Calloway County all the way to Hardin, where I grew up playing baseball and where my dad and papaw did business with Jack Dunigan at the local granary. While we were in that revival service, I knew I couldn't get out of this call, and I probably shouldn't have done this but I didn't know any better at the time...I knew there was a story in the Bible about somebody putting out a fleece and it worked...so I put out a fleece. I had noticed in that revival that Hardin Baptist Church had the same hymnal that we had, not the Baptist Hymnal, not the Broadman Hymnal, but a Heavenly Highway Hymnal. Now Ledbetter being a rural church, we had the poor version of that...a brown, soft cover hymnal. We were now in a city church, Hardin, and they had money I suppose, therefore they had the hardback version with a black binding. While that sermon was being preached I could not tell you a thing that preacher said, but I started having a conversation with God... *Ok God, if you really want me to preach the gospel and I have to pastor a church, here is what I need you to do. I need you to let me know I need to surrender all to you.* Now, I knew the page number of the song, so I just said... *Lord, instead of announcing the name of the song, you have the song leader say, "We are going to sing page number..."* and about the time I said that, guess what he said? That very page number. I thought this was

a coincidence, because you remember that other guy in the Bible with the fleece thought the same thing. Now, all of this is happening in an instant, so I said...*God, I want you to now have that song leader announce that he is going to do something different because he felt led to do it and he's not going to do what Baptists normally do* (Have you noticed how Baptists normally don't sing the third verse of a hymn?) *particularly, I need him to say we are going to sing the third verse...* Guess what he said? Yeah...

I surrendered to preach the gospel at what we now call the chapel of Hardin Baptist Church two and a half years before I would become the pastor. Unbeknownst to me, God had a plan for my life that I could not envision and I would get to be a part of Hardin's story, which is a God story. It took me a few days before I announced that I had surrendered to preach. A few months after surrendering to preach, I felt led to resign at Ledbetter of being the Sunday school director and a Sunday school teacher, just believing God was through with me there. I got home that afternoon, Celisa will bear witness to this, and I got a call from Owen's Chapel Baptist Church. They asked if I would let them come to talk me about being their pastor. I became their pastor and pastored for two years at Owen's Chapel Baptist Church. Then, we had a men's prayer meeting one Sunday night and I shared with the men what I was feeling in my heart. I said, "Guys, I don't understand this, and I love you and I know you all love me, but I feel like God may be through with me here at Owen's Chapel." See, when I surrendered to preach I surrendered to be a bivocational pastor. Somebody thought someone hurt my feelings...no. Everything was great.

Now, I got home that afternoon and guess what happened? The same thing happened that happened two years before. I got a call from Hershel White, the chairman of the pulpit committee of Hardin Baptist Church, and he wanted to know if I would consider talking with Hardin. Wow! Now, he was honest with me; he said, "Bro. Ricky, we have another person that we are highly interested in, but some in the church think you might be the person. Would you talk with us?" So we began to talk. In that meeting, the pulpit committee asked me, "How would you lead us as a church as a pastor?" Because I was following a guy who had been here 17 years and I

was 22 years old, I could see the look in their eyes—they were taking a big chance. I just said to them, “Guys, I want to tell you what I’ve learned. I’ve learned that I was raised wrong in viewing a pastor. I had always believed that Ephesians chapter 4 had been engrained in me that when it talks about churches, God gives churches pastors, but the pastor is supposed to equip the saints, he’s supposed to do the work of ministry, and he’s supposed to edify the body.” Then I shared with them that I believe Western Kentucky is wrong in this. I don’t believe a church should hire a pastor and expect the pastor to do those three things. I think this passage is teaching (and I showed them) is that when God gifts a church with a pastor the pastor is supposed to do one thing, and that one thing is to equip the saints. Then, it’s the saints in the church who do the work of ministry, and then it’s the work of ministry of the saints that is actually edifying and growing the body of Christ. I just said, “If I get to be your pastor I want to concentrate on one thing and one thing only—I want to concentrate on leading and preaching and teaching God’s Word in such a way that the saints of this church get equipped to do what they’re supposed to do. Then I’m going to encourage the saints to do what they’re supposed to do, and when the saints start doing what they’re supposed to do, our church will grow!” So that pulpit committee took a chance, feeling led of the Lord to give me an opportunity to preach a trial sermon. And I will never forget, this was not in my notes but just while preaching, I made this comment, “Wouldn’t it be awesome if years down the road Hardin, Kentucky wasn’t known for catfish, but we were known for the gospel?” I remember my family getting out of church and driving over to the restaurant in Hardin for catfish, or going on a Friday night, and we would pull up in that parking lot and there would be no place to park! You would put your name on a list and you would wait what sometimes felt like hours to get to eat catfish. That’s how well known Hardin is for catfish! And a 22 year old kid had a vision for Hardin to one day be known for the gospel rather than catfish...I think you know the rest of the story. When most people view Hardin Kentucky now, they do not view us as the catfish capital of Western Kentucky anymore; they view us for the good news of Jesus Christ! That is our story!

That became the DNA of Hardin Baptist Church: We are saints. It took a long time because most of us were raised to believe we were just ole' sinners saved by grace. Yet the Bible never calls us that, the Bible calls us saints. Yes, we are saints who can occasionally sin, but we've been set apart from a life of selfishness to a life of salvation in Christ Jesus. And because of that experience of salvation, having Jesus on the inside, working on the outside, oh what a change we have in our lives! (Now, I've told you the story of when Pastor Cummins was here from Trinidad and he sang that song, and let me just say, Pastor Cummins didn't sing that song the way Matt sings that song. Pastor Cummins started singing on one side of the pulpit and then he danced back and forth across the stage to the other side singing, "Oh what a change in my life! I've got JESUS on the inside, WORKING on the outside!") With Jesus working on the inside and that being evident on the outside, all of a sudden folks that we had begun to work with and recreate with started checking us out. The next thing you know, folks started attending Hardin Baptist Church.

Then, we started to remember and realize that each one of us has a spiritual giftedness from the Lord. We are a part of a body and we are supposed to take that gift and find a place of ministry, and use that ministry to serve the body...and the church began to grow. That is our story! We are a church that believes the pastoral leadership should equip us—the teaching and preaching of God's Word equips us to be who we are supposed to be so that we can then experience a life change and use our spiritual gift in a place of ministry, and it's this ministry that is edifying this body. And as we ministered, we began to take the saying of Ron Dunn and remind ourselves that "The main thing is to keep the main thing, the main thing." and that has been our story for the last 40 years. We've been keeping the main thing, the main thing...and that is the main thing...to keep the main thing, the main thing. And then, as we preached through the Bible verse by verse, we began to be a church that swung away from being a man-centered church, thinking this was all about us, to realizing it's all about Him. Some of you remember when we began to remind ourselves, "It's not about us, it's about Him (and we would point up) and

it's about them." and we would point to all of those people out in the community.

Then, we decided that we needed to actually plant the seeds of the gospel. Just like a farmer takes the seed and plants it in the ground, we needed to take the seed of the gospel and plant it in people's lives. We got trained in a program called "Continuing Witness Training." I'll never forget this...a man in our church took a week's vacation—now I didn't know at the time that his job did not give him paid vacation so it was an unpaid vacation—to go with me to be trained. That is the heart of this church. He never said a word to me. We began to train folks, and it is a 13 week training where we would teach how to witness. Then, we would take people out into the community, go door-to-door, and talk to people. We surveyed a church and asked people to give us names of people who didn't know Christ, and at one time, we had a list of almost 800 people in this community who didn't know Christ...and we started praying for them. The way this worked was my first two people to train were Celisa and Ron Thompson. We would get together and we would have training, we would pray for the people we were going to go visit, we would go visit, and I would lead the presentation. After a few weeks as they were learning the presentation, they would start to share faith in Christ, too. Then, if they got in a spot where they didn't know what to do I would come in and pick it up, so it was a great way on how to train people how to share faith in Christ. Those first thirteen weeks, six of us went out in two teams. We had thirteen people get saved and thirteen people got baptized, but not a one of them was baptized at Hardin. They all got baptized in other churches, and guess what? We didn't quit. We just kept on sharing faith in Christ. Without us realizing it, God revealed to us that we didn't have a church-vision heart, but a Kingdom-vision heart. We weren't doing what we were doing to grow the church; we were doing what we were doing for the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is bigger than the church, but the church is the vehicle that carries the message of the Kingdom.

I have to tell you two quick stories. They just capture the fertile soil of Hardin. We were in a home of a man named Hershel McKendree. Hershel's

family came to church, but Hershel didn't. We got to go to visit Hershel, and I am sharing the gospel with him and Ron and Celisa are with me. They are supposed to be praying while I'm witnessing. So I'm sharing the gospel with Hershel when all of a sudden Hershel interrupted me and said, "Bro. Ricky, you know that door you came in?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Hit it." Before I could think, Celisa and Ron were in the truck...truck cranked ready to leave, and I'm just realizing what happened. So I stay a few more minutes and we leave heartbroken. We come back to church, we fall on our face because we have offended somebody with the gospel and we don't want that to cause him not to come to Christ, and so we prayed for him. God would never let us get that man off of our hearts. Well, Celisa and I got ready to build a house several years later, and Hershel was a carpenter in the community. We asked him to build our house and did a great job. I wish I could tell you there were many times I got to share faith with him, but I didn't. I did a couple of times, but not a lot. When he finished our house, he still did not know Christ. Years passed and one day I get a call and it's a call from Hershel. He said, "Bro. Ricky, I just want you to know I got saved and you're the first person I wanted to tell. I wanted you to know I now know Jesus." Now, that gospel seed was planted years and years and years earlier, but praise God Hardin is good soil. People had given up on Hershel. They didn't think he would ever come to know Christ, but he did.

Poke Jones! Oh, I'll never forget, Poke. Celisa, Ron, and I went to visit Poke and got to share the gospel with Poke. He listened and he was gracious...but our church didn't know if he was saved or not. Poke would come to church here for some events, not all events, but this one night he confessed he didn't know Christ in a personal way. He didn't receive Christ that night, but we were getting ready to go out the door and Poke says, "Bro. Ricky, can I tell you something about you Christians?" I thought... *oh no, here it comes...* Do you know what he said to me? He said, "You Christians think we non-Christians don't want to hear about Jesus, but we really do." It convicted my heart. We kept praying for Poke and praying for Poke. I will never forget this...I was in a funeral home in Benton before cellphones and somebody called the funeral home and said, "Tell Bro. Ricky

Poke is in the hospital at Paducah and he wants him to come." I left the funeral home and drove as fast I could to Western Baptist Hospital. I did not know the circumstances, but I went into his room and he was sitting in his bed grinning at me. Poke said, "You know why you're here?" I said, "I sure hope so." He said, "That's why you're here." I said, "Poke! I've already told you about Jesus! You know what you need to do! I didn't have to be here." This is what he said to me, "I wanted you to be here because you're the first and only one who has ever told me about Jesus, and I just wanted you to be here." He got out of his bed, knelt down beside his bed, prayed to receive Christ as Lord and Savior, got back in the bed, and we had a prayer together! Now, Poke was going to be the 50th patient at Western Baptist Hospital; they had had 49 successful heart surgeries. I started to go out the door and he said to me, "Bro. Ricky, I don't know how long it'll take me to get over this heart surgery." I was doing a revival at New Harmony Baptist Church and the last thing he said to me as I went out the door was, "When I get well, you're going to put me under that water, right? I want to show everybody my faith is in Jesus Christ." Do you know what news I got before I got to that revival that night? He died on the operating table. But the gospel had been planted in his heart and he was good soil, and it's people like this that are a part of our story. This is our story!

Soon, because of planting the gospel in people's lives, people are coming to know Christ, people are living life changes, and we have more and more people showing up. The next thing you know, in that little downtown sanctuary people are standing out on the porch while we are preaching; we were having to open up windows and people were actually listening in through the windows! So then, we get ready to make an important decision and that's to build a new building, but we got devastating news. It was going to cost over half a million dollars to build the building we wanted to build, and there was no way we could do that. We prayed and prayed and prayed, and finally decided if we would all just volunteer we could cut out a lot of labor and maybe we could do it. So we set a business meeting where we were going to vote to build a sanctuary downtown, borrow \$165,000 from the bank, and try to build it with volunteer labor. We went to Hardin for that meeting and the treasurer of the church came to me and

said, "Bro. Ricky, I have some bad news." I said, "What?" He said, "We did not raise enough money in the offering this morning to pay your salary. I hate to tell you this, but we have some bills that we have to cover and we have to pay those bills before we pay you." I was young, and I just said to the treasurer, "I understand. We do need to pay those bills, but Celisa probably has some bills that we need to pay, too." Now, this was before the business meeting where we were going to ask to borrow \$165,000. I said, "Do you think it would be okay if we just announced to the church that we don't have enough money to pay my salary, and let's just take up a love offering? Whatever we get—\$25, \$50—we'll take it and then we can wait until we get enough money to pay my salary." The treasurer agreed. We announced that, took up a love offering, and got three times more money than we got that morning. I didn't get all of the money; I just got the part that was for my salary. We had the business meeting and we voted unanimously—after not being able to pay the pastor's salary—to build the downtown sanctuary.

Now, some people would say we were foolish. No...we had learned as a church to walk with God and trust in God. We believed it was a one-time circumstance that we couldn't pay the pastor and that God was leading us to build a sanctuary because we weren't building a sanctuary *to* grow; we were building a sanctuary because we *were* growing. We built that sanctuary with volunteer labor. It wasn't long until one service wouldn't hold us all. We had to go to two services, and then from two services to three services. Do any of you remember the EFR service? Let me tell you what happened. We were having so many people coming to the third service, especially college kids, that some of our members said, "Bro. Ricky, if you'll project the service on the wall of the gymnasium, we will sit over there and give up our seat in the sanctuary." They called it the EFR service, the Eight Foot Ricky service. For the first time in my life, I was above six feet; I was eight feet tall! We had a camera on the preacher and it was going on a screen in a gymnasium. People would drive to Hardin Kentucky and never be in a live service because their heart wasn't about them; it was about HIM and it was about THEM. That is who we are! This is our

story! We built that building in one year with volunteer labor. Three years later, we were debt free.

Then, some of you remember this. We had this neat ministry called Youth Explosion. Celisa had begun to realize that once kids got in high school they didn't want to come to Vacation Bible School. So we asked ourselves what would happen if we just ministered to high school kids. We started out with 30, and before that week was over, just about every one of them had brought a friend and we got up to 60. When we retired that ministry several years later we were running 1,400 in Youth Explosion! I will never forget the year we showed up and had so many kids we had to do everything twice. So before that ended, we were doing the same thing at Youth Explosion that we were doing at Hardin—we were having three services. I still run into people from other states and other places who will say, "Bro. Ricky, I don't know if you remember me, but I got saved during Youth Explosion." Wow!

We were seeing the reality that we weren't a church with a church-vision; we were a church with a Kingdom-vision because we were trying to keep the main thing the main thing. It's not about us; it's about Him and it's about them. We were getting to be a part of a God story and God was revealing what I always knew physically, but didn't know spiritually. See, growing up in Calloway County on a farm we had that hill ground, we had those ridges. I can't tell you how many times as I would drive by Clarks River at Dexter, and then I would get over here to Hardin and look at the Clarks River Bottoms and see those crops being raised in those bottoms producing 50, 60, or 70 more bushels of corn than we could produce on the east side. Well, now I'm getting to be a spiritual farmer in Hardin. We are not hard soil, we are not rocky soil, and we are not thorny soil; we are good soil! God is doing what only He can do, and that is to bring glory to Him because the world could never have believed our story. Hardin Baptist Church got invited to a national training seminar where they were going to pilot CWT (Continuing Witness Training) 2. Hardin was chosen to represent rural churches, small churches, and Celisa and I were at this national training seminar and we were going to be the first ones to do it. The guy

walked up to the board and he put the five things on the board that you had to have to grow a church. I looked at Celisa, she looked at me, and do you know how many of those five things we had? NONE! Our story is a God story!

Next, college kids started coming to Hardin. I just want to make sure you know this because some people don't know this story. One summer a Murray State football player showed up early for summer practice. He was from Chicago, Illinois, a city kid, and for some reason he chose to attend on Wednesday nights at Hardin Baptist Church. Before long, he brought another football player who brought another football player, then the whole coaching staff showed up, and then more college kids start coming. The next thing you know I get a phone call from a guy named David Burns who is leaving Memphis, Tennessee with an organization called Campus Outreach, a Presbyterian organization. He wants to meet with me because he wants to be the chaplain to the Murray State football team, and he realizes football players are coming to Hardin Baptist Church. He comes to our church to check us out and we had a meeting together. Do you know what our church did? A southern Baptist church opened our arms to a ministry from the Presbyterian church of Memphis, because it was not about the church it was about the Kingdom of God! The rest is our story...we know what God did through that partnership!

Then, it got bad. Not all of you walked with us through this, but because we dedicated ourselves to be a verse by verse through the Bible teaching church, we started seeing this recurring theme in the Bible on baptism. We began to believe that baptism is not a denominational thing. You either have it or you don't. It's like salvation; it's either real or it's not. We began to believe that baptism does not unite you to the church; the reason you get baptized is not to join a church, you get baptized to identify your faith in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our study of Scripture led us to begin to believe that if you put your faith and trust in Jesus Christ and you get fully immersed to show that faith in Jesus was saving you, not water, we believed you were biblically baptized.

Here was our problem...none of our brother and sister churches believed that. So we realized that if we practiced what we really ought to practice as a church we were going to have to withdraw fellowship from the Blood River Baptist Association, which is the association of the Southern Baptist churches of Marshall and Calloway County. We fought that for years. We just kept rebaptizing people. I will never forget driving my truck to a deacon's meeting on a Monday night and parking in front of our Family Life Center. As soon as I got out of my truck I heard the Lord, not in an audible voice but louder than an audible voice, say to me... *Why are you rebaptizing those that I have baptized?*...I knew what the answer was. It was because of the Blood River Baptist Association. I went into that meeting and I said to the guys right off the bat (this wasn't on the agenda), "Guys, I just want y'all to know I will never rebaptize somebody in water that I believe is already biblically baptized." Every one of those deacons said, "Then what are we going to do?" I said, "You're going to baptize them because y'all are the ordained men of the church." Every one of those deacons said, "If you're not getting in the water, we aren't getting in the water." We had a short meeting, "What are we going to do?" I suggested this, I really did. Now, you have never heard me say a deacon joke, amen? I love deacons. I said to those guys, "I think we have two options. The first option is we quit rebaptizing people and we leave the association. The second option is we rebaptize them but you're going to baptize them...and we aren't going to baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, we're going to baptize them in the name of the Blood River Baptist Association. That way everybody will know if you come to faith in Christ you get a Father, Son, and Holy Spirit baptism—and if we think you're biblically baptized—when we baptize you in the name of the association everybody there will know we think you're already baptized." The deacons said, "No, no, no. We can't do that!" I agreed with them that probably wouldn't have been a good thing to do, so we didn't do that, praise the Lord! ☺ The deacons said, "Why don't you teach us." So, we took a Sunday morning, a Sunday night, and a Wednesday night, and for six months, we studied every passage in the Bible about baptism. When we came to our vote, we had the largest business meeting in the history of Hardin Baptist Church and it was unanimous that we go with the Bible. But, I want to tell you

what happened in the meantime. We asked the association to study with us and they wouldn't, so we had to withdraw. It broke my heart. Now, Hardin Baptist Church was always so gracious to let me preach the gospel wherever somebody wanted me to come preach. The night we did that, sixteen churches that cancelled with me and told me because we were changing our baptism policy I could not come and preach in their churches.

That hurt, but let me tell you what God birthed. At that time, a son of a Southern Baptist missionary was attending our church and he introduced me to his dad. His dad was a Southern Baptist missionary in Brazil. He met me in my office and he said, "Bro. Ricky, would you consider taking the mission money you gave to the association and start going on a mission trip?" See, when our church had to withdraw from the association we asked the association if we could continue to give them our money to do missions and they said no. So, we took that money and we went on a mission trip to the Amazon River. Who would have ever thought, out of the most horrible thing that happened in my life, God would birth a ministry on the bank of the Amazon River? Today we have four missionary couples that we support on the bank of the Amazon River. We still fully support the Southern Baptist Convention, we still support Nick in Nicaragua, we still support Josh in Malawi, but we've also picked up four couples that are taking the gospel up and down the Amazon River! God birthed that out of our story...this church's faithfulness to acting on what we believe is God's Word.

Here is the final story. It kind of catches us all up, because you're a part of this story. Some of you were a part of this story before me and Celisa. Those three services and the EFR service just wouldn't hold everybody. I will never forget the Sunday my dad said, "Ricky, I saw three cars drive around, couldn't find a parking spot, and they left." The church began to believe it was time to relocate. We had two spots to choose from, a spot on the other side of the red light and a spot here on 641. I want to confess to you (the church knew it at the time) I didn't want to do it. It was pride. I confess it. I didn't want us to be one of those churches on the four lanes where it was just easy to come to church. If you came to Hardin, I wanted

you to have to want to come to Hardin, to sacrifice, because it wasn't about us; it's about Him and them. I was worried that if we came to a new location on the four lanes it would change the DNA of our church. I had a person from Clarksville, Tennessee say to me, "Ricky, be careful if you relocate." He said, "Austin Peay used to hate to come to Murray and play in Racer Arena, but when they built the new building we love to come now because it's not the same. The intensity of the fans is not the same in the CFSB Center as it was Old Racer Arena." This guy put a word in my head that maybe if we came out here we would lose who we were. I started hearing different voices in my head and couldn't hear the voice of God.

Now, I don't say this to draw any attention to myself. I haven't done this since and probably never do it again, but I did not know what God wanted and I knew I had an awesome responsibility as the pastor of this church, so I said to God...*God, there are some people who did this in the Bible. There are some people who believe in doing a forty day fasting. I am going to do a forty day fast and I'm trusting you're going to tell me what we need to do.* So I started a forty day fast. Now, can I just say that is hard? Especially if you're a farmer! See, I had given up the farm when I came to Hardin, but about three years later the deacons told me they didn't mind me going back to farming with Dad and Papaw, so this was crop season for me. Now, I had to tell Celisa about the fast, but she was the only one who knew. But I had a mother...and she made sure you ate! Now, for forty days during spring, I had to keep her from knowing I was fasting, so Celisa would act like she had packed my lunch. We would get ready to stop and have lunch, I would come up with something to do, and I would show her that lunchbox. That lunchbox had nothing in it, but my mom never knew because I had to hear God's voice. I'll never forget this, it was day eleven, and I knew it was my pride that was keeping me from wanting to come out here, but God showed me...*Yes, this is my will for the church.* Several days later, I walked into the church on Wednesday night during the meal ministry and I heard God say...*Eat.* I said...*I can't.* He said...*Why?* I said...*I'm on a forty day fast.* He said...*I thought you were fasting to hear from me?* I said...*I am.* He said...*Didn't I tell you a couple days ago? I said... Yeah.* He said...*Eat.* So, I ate.

So, we started the move out here and I just want you to know I was not 100% in yet, even though I knew it was God's will. We leveled the land and we had decided we were not going to continue to borrow money, totally, so we raised a certain amount. We were getting ready to start building the building, and I just happened to be in Draffenville, Kentucky, in a place called Parcell's and I ran into a pastor, Brother Don, from First Baptist Benton. He said to me with a big grin on his face, "Ricky, you're not going to believe what's happened with our church." I said, "What?" He said, "We've had a member who has decided to give us a \$750,000 interest free loan to be paid back over 10 years." That's what happens in big city churches. I'm just pastoring the bottoms at Hardin outside of Dexter, but we are a city church. I walked out of that restaurant and I just said to God...*Lord, I know I shouldn't do this, but I'm just going to ask you. Would you verify for me 100% that this is what your will is for our church? I know I fasted. I know you've told me. But Lord, could you have the same guy that made that loan to Brother Don and his church make that same loan to us?* I prayed that and I shared it with one of my buddies who is pretty smart in finances, and he said, "Bro. Ricky, that's the most foolish thing you've ever done." He said, "We don't have anybody in Western Kentucky who could do that." I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "You don't understand the kind of money you would have to have to be able to make two loans that way and not get anything back of that money for ten years. It's not going to happen." He was trying to encourage me. I didn't think much more about it. I was sitting in my office one day counseling with somebody and my secretary interrupts my counseling, and she's never done that before. She said, "Bro. Ricky, you have to take this call." I said, "I'm counseling." She said, "You have got to take this call!" So, I take the call while the lady is sitting there across from me. She says, "Do I need to leave?" I said, "I don't know. Let me see what it's about." Now, I need to tell you this. The reason this lady was in my office was because there was a man in the church claiming to be a prophet who was trying to lead her away from our ministry. He had convinced her that God didn't lead me and Hardin. So she was there for counseling and just happened to be in my office when this happened. I take the call and this guy says, "Bro. Ricky, I'm passing by 641 and I see y'all are building a new building possibly." I

said, "Yes." I am not lying...he said, "Would you be interested in receiving a loan interest free from a non-church member?" I held it together. I wanted to say yes, but I thought...*Nope, I can't do that because I have prayed a specific prayer.* Here's what I said to the man, "Sir, I would be glad to but I want you to know that I prayed a specific prayer, and I just want you to know that the only person I can take a loan from is the man who made the loan to another church and to another pastor." I mentioned that church and I mentioned that pastor. I said, "It has to be the same amount, \$750,000, interest free for 10 years." He said, "That's exactly what I feel led to give Hardin." That's our story. It's a God story!

Now, here we are! It's May 7th, 2023. I just want to ask you this question. Are you us, or are you just attending? Have you repented of sin and put your faith and trust in Christ? If you haven't you can't be us, but you can be us if you repent of sin and put your faith in Jesus and follow Him in believer's baptism. Then you can be a part of us, and you will be that good soil! You'll learn your identity, you'll experience this life change, you'll discover you have a gift, you'll find a place of ministry, you'll serve this body, and this body will continue to grow. Are you us? Do you know you're a saint of God? Do you know what your spiritual gift is? Have you found your ministry inside the walls of this church or outside the walls of this church? Will you help us keep the main thing, the main thing? Will you help us continue to believe it's not about us, but it's about Him and it's about them? Because I want to tell you, Hardin is good soil. You are good soil and God is taking us together and us individually to bring honor and glory to Himself. This is our story, but our story doesn't end today. We don't know when our story ends. Will you help us continue the God story?