

Five Life Lessons

By Howard Dayton, excerpted from *Crown Chronicles* newsletter, Spring 2000

Robert Fraley and Van Ardan—long-time members of the Crown family, leave a valuable legacy.

I first read about the breaking news on Yahoo online during my lunch break. A Lear Jet operated by a central Florida firm, Sunjet Aviation, had left Orlando at 9:09 a.m. headed for Houston, Texas. Air traffic controllers had lost voice contact with the plane that was currently off course. Two Air Force F16's following the Lear Jet were unable to contact the pilots. The assumption was that the pilots were unconscious due to a faulty oxygen supply or the loss of cabin pressure. It would be only a matter of time until the plane would run out of fuel. Nothing was reported at that time about who was on board. Like so many others, I prayed for some kind of miracle.

Back at the office I got a call informing me that it was Payne Stewart's plane, and with him on board were Robert Fraley and Van Ardan. Robert and Van were two very close friends of mine. Consequently, this is the most painful article I've ever had to write.

Bev and I knew the Fraleys and Ardans, first as friends, and then as members of the Crown family. By 1985 I had come to the conclusion that what the Bible had to say about handling money was more effectively learned and applied in a small group than in a lecture setting. Van and Debbie Ardan led the very first Crown group in Washington, D.C. For a time we explored with Van and Debbie the possibility of their joining Crown Ministries staff.

When Robert Fraley moved to Orlando, a mutual friend introduced us. That was the beginning of a great friendship. When Crown Ministries was organized, Robert Fraley served as one of our initial Board members. In the subsequent years, the Fraleys funded the development of several Crown studies including *The Secret*, which is for children ages 8 to 12, the *Financial Study for Teens*, and the *Urban Edition*. One of their passions was to help people in need. They believed that one effective way to serve the poor was to equip them to handle money God's way.

I would like to share several important life lessons I've learned from these extraordinary men and their wives that have application for us all.

Lesson One: Love your Spouse

"Husbands love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her"
(Ephesians 5:25) .

Everyone who knew Robert understood that he loved his wife, Dixie. In college Robert was a quarterback at the University of Alabama on Bear Bryant's 1973 National Championship football team, while Dixie attended Auburn University. People in the state of Alabama will tell you that such a marriage had to have been ordained by heaven because it was like a Hatfield marrying a McCoy. And, in truth, their marriage was a gift from God.

At the memorial services for Robert and later for Van, both of their wives were able to say, "We knew we were loved women." The last thing Van did before boarding the flight was to make one more quick call to Debbie Ardan to say, "I love you more today than I've ever loved you."

How does a husband express his love for his wife other than by telling her? Robert was a good role model. In a healthy way he challenged Dixie to pursue a growing relationship with Christ. For example, they would often select an issue concerning the Christian life and debate it together, not in an adversarial way, but rather, in an *“iron-sharpening-iron”* (Proverbs 27:17) manner to help them both reach an understanding of why they believed what they believed. They became part of a small group that would select a classic book to read each month. This group would meet to talk over what they had learned and how it had influenced their commitment to the Lord.

Robert was also a model of how a husband should express love for his wife in very practical ways. He was diligent to conform to God’s financial principles and had their financial house in good order. Robert left Dixie the legacy of no debt, a working budget, and his estate planning well done.

As Robert Fraley often said, “The question to ask yourself is not how much do I love my wife? It’s how much she knows and feels that from me? Am I demonstrating that on a daily basis?” Dixie made the intentional decision to reciprocate. She explains, “I decided to love Robert without reservation. I’ve talked to widows since Robert’s death and many of them feel guilty that perhaps they could have done more to nurture a love relationship with their husband. I thank the Lord that I have no regrets.”

Lesson Two: Be Excellent in Your work

“Do you see a man skilled in his work? He will stand before kings; he will not stand before obscure men” (Proverbs 22:29) .

Van and Robert were the President and the Chairman of the Board respectively of Leader Enterprises, an Orlando-based sports management firm that Robert founded. They represented professional athletes and coaches, including baseball players Chipper Jones and Orel Herscheiser; Coaches Joe Gibbs, Bill Parcells, and Dan Reeves; and golfers Paul Azinger and Payne Stewart. In the world where self-promotion, self-centeredness, and greed are so evident, Robert and Van developed a reputation as businessmen of integrity. Robert hated the title “agent.” More than anything else, he was a good friend, a wise counselor, and an unselfish servant. They were effective representatives for their clients and skillful negotiators. Coach Dan Reeves said, “I never knew anyone who, from day one, could go through life and be as straightforward and honest as Robert Fraley.”

Lesson Three: Share Your Faith

“Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect” (1 Peter 1:15, NJV) .

Because they sought to be men of integrity who excelled in their work, they earned the respect of others. This provided them a platform from which at appropriate times they could share their faith in Christ. Robert, Van, Payne Stewart, along with their wives, became the closest of friends. Partly as a result of their influence, Payne also gave his life to Christ.

The Lear Jet crashed on Monday, October 25, 1999, and services for Robert, Van, and Payne were on the following Thursday and Friday. The three Orlando funerals attended by a parade of athletic celebrities were besieged by reporters, while an armada of trucks with satellite dishes pointing toward the sky surrounded the churches. Payne’s funeral was carried live by CNN. Each service could have easily turned into a media circus. But the funerals became a forum to proclaim the gospel of Jesus

Christ in a powerful way through the testimony of those whose lives they touched. Like the apostle Paul, they were determined that *“now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death ”* (Philippians 1:20). They grasped the opportunity, as emotionally difficult as it was, and made it count for the cause of Christ.

Lesson Four: Surround Yourself with Godly Counselors

“Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor. For if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion. But woe to the one who falls when there is not another to lift him up . . . a cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart” (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12) .

In 1988 Robert and Dixie made the decision to go the extra mile in seeking godly counsel about how they handled their money. They began the tradition of meeting annually with eight trusted friends. Among them was their accountant, a financial planner and their estate lawyer, and their business planner.

Each year the Fraleys exposed how they spent their money the previous twelve months and went over the budget for the upcoming year. They talked through their financial statement and would ask advice on financial decisions they were facing. That kind of counsel and accountability helped the Fraleys make wise and well thought-out decisions about spending, saving, giving, and operating their business. Dixie explains, “There were many times that we would not spend money on an unwise purchase because we knew that we would have to explain it to the group. It was a great safety net for us.”

But as beneficial as it was during Robert’s life, the real benefit became apparent the week after the accident when the group gathered to meet with Dixie. Anyone who has had to go through the unexpected death of someone that is close to you knows what an emotionally exhausting ordeal it is. Then when it’s all over, those left behind are faced with the task of uncovering and sorting through a dizzying array of the financial assets and obligations, such as estate taxes, debts, liabilities, investments, titles, the family business, etc. At the absolute worst time for it, grieving widows have to struggle to make wise decisions.

The Saturday after the accident the group of counselors cot together with Dixie. During that meeting I experienced one of the most remarkable lessons of my life. For ten years it had my great privilege to be a part of that wonderful group, but it wasn’t until that meeting that I understood the real benefits.

The group possessed wisdom and experience in business. They also shared the deep sense of Dixie’s loss, as well as, an intimate knowledge of the Fraleys’ business and finances. I was amazed at their insight. The advice could not have been more accurate if they had had ten years to prepare for that meeting. In a way, that was what they had been doing all along.

As friends, Robert and I had no hesitation about challenging one another on a particular issue. However, I never in my life felt more challenged by Robert than when I was driving home from that meeting. I determined that, along with my wife and children, we would follow Robert and Dixie’s example to intentionally surround ourselves with a group of godly counselors to help us make good decisions now and prepare ourselves for the time the Lord would take us home.

Lesson Five: Nurture an Eternal Perspective

"We fix our eyes not at what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:18, NJV) .

Robert Fraley lived his life with his eyes fixed on eternity. He had a framed quote from Augustine in his workout room that read, "We must care for our bodies as though they were going to live forever, but we must care our souls as if we are going to die tomorrow."

Scriptures reveal that there is a heaven and a hell, that there is a coming judgment, and that He will grant eternal rewards unequally. The Lord wants the best for us and wants to motivate us to invest our lives in such a way that we can enjoy an intimate relationship with Him now, as well as the maximum of rewards and responsibilities in heaven.

I believe the single greatest hindrance to seeing our lives and our assets in their true light is this: our persistent failure to view our present lives through the lens of eternity. Scripture states that an eternal perspective should determine the character of our life here on earth, as well as how we handle money and possessions. The everyday choices I make will influence the very course of eternity.

The person who does not know the Lord looks at life as a brief interval that begins at birth and ends at death. Looking to the future he sees no further than his own life span. Bereft of eternal perspective, he thinks, "If this life is all there is, why deny myself any pleasure or possessions?" Given that premise, why should he come to any other conclusion?

Those who know Christ are people of an entirely different perspective. We know life is short, it is the preface, not the book; the preliminaries, not the main event; the sound check, not the concert. It is the testing period that will determine much of the composition of that eternal life for which we were born again.

Financial planners have a hard time convincing people to look down the road instead of simply focusing on today. "Don't think this year," they will tell you. "Think thirty years from now." The wise person does indeed think ahead, but far more than thirty years-thirty million years ahead. As John Tillotson said, "He who provides for this life but takes no care for eternity is wise for a moment but a fool forever."

Matthew Henry said, "It ought to be the business of every day to prepare for our last day." Throughout the Bible we are reminded that life on earth is brief. Moses realized that true wisdom flowed out of understanding that our lives are short. So he asked the Lord to help him number the days he had on earth. *"As for the days of our life, they contain seventy years, or if due to strength, eighty years -for soon it is gone and we fly away - So teach us to number our days that we may present You a heart of wisdom"* (Psalm 90:10, 12). Robert and Dixie Fraley numbered their days, but as Dixie said, "We just didn't realize how few were really left."

DIXIE AND DEBBIE WANT to let everyone know that they are doing fine, moving ahead with the same kind of faith that was so evident during the early days of this terrible tragedy. Debbie is busy raising four children. Dixie is overseeing the business and looking forward to being more involved in ministry. Please join us in praying for the Lord to continue to comfort them in a most gracious and tender way.