



A Modern-Day Challenge  
for Readers of *In His Steps*

# In His Place

*A Novel*

Harry C. Griffith

# Praise for *In His Place*

“Through masterful character development, tight writing, and a fast-paced narrative, Harry Griffith packs the pages of *In His Place* with complexity, poignancy, and truth. The reader weeps to consider the failure of the Church to incarnate Jesus for a lonely old man and then watches as the Body of Christ finds it faith, its feet, and its courage. That Christlike courage is contagious and transformative, but it doesn’t happen in the 15 days recorded in the novel. It happened over 15 years of invested ministry by a pastor who came to understand the truth that to live is Christ and to die is gain.”

—Carmen Fowler LaBerge, President, Presbyterian Lay Committee Chairman, Common Ground Christian Network

“I highly recommend *In His Place*, first as a novel with vivid human interactions by (mostly) likable characters who are thrown into situations that test their Christian commitment. Aside from enjoying the novel, however, I have been unable to shake the question raised by an atheist friend of the pastor. When a lonely member of the parish takes his own life, the atheist wants to know how anyone who belongs to a church can be so alone. *In His Place* poses a challenge for all church-going Christians. Are we really acting in His place?”

—Charlotte Hays, coauthor of *Being Dead Is No Excuse*, frequent contributor to the *National Catholic Register*

“On one occasion, while driving through my hometown in the Atlanta suburbs, I felt a strong inner urge—no, a push—to stop and offer a ride to man with a briefcase. He got in and told me where he was heading. I noted it was a long way to walk. He said it was, but he had Parkinson’s and could not drive. On arrival, he got out and said, ‘You just did for me what Jesus would have done.’ An unforgettable moment! This book’s premise is just that—If we live ‘in Him’ life will be remarkable and so fulfilling. I encourage you to read it.”

—Victor Oliver

“Along with justification by grace through faith, the indwelling Christ was Paul’s core understanding of the Christian faith and way. Living a life IN CHRIST is the nature of Christian discipleship. That means we are primarily responsible not TO Christ, but FOR Christ. We are to live as Christ in the world. In this attention gripping novel, *In His Place*, Harry Griffith provides an exciting picture of one man seeking to live “in His place.” If you will read the first few pages, you will not want to put it down; but more important, reading on, the core meaning of Christian discipleship will become crystal clear.”

—Maxie Dunnam, Former President, Asbury Theological Seminary and former World Editor of *The Upper Room*

“There are a number of surprises in this first novel by Harry Griffith. First the positive and honest portrait of a sincere, but very human, pastor. One sees that so seldom in the media and modern literature. Next crisis after crisis suddenly appear and take both the pastor and the reader by surprise and move the plot along with increasing tempo. Lastly, mixed in throughout the book, we find theology and practical challenge for both the individual Christian reader and for any Christian congregation. By all means give this book a read and take the challenge.”

—Rt. Rev. John H. Rodgers Jr. (Retired), Dean/  
President Emeritus Trinity School for Ministry

# In His Place

A Modern-Day Challenge  
for Readers of *In His Steps*

Harry C. Griffith

SHILOH RUN  PRESS

An Imprint of Barbour Publishing, Inc.



© 2016 by Harry C. Griffith

Print ISBN 978-1-63409-766-6

eBook Editions:

Adobe Digital Edition (.epub) 978-1-63409-848-9

Kindle and MobiPocket Edition (.prc) 978-1-63409-849-6

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted for commercial purposes, except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without written permission of the publisher.

Churches and other noncommercial interests may reproduce portions of this book without the express written permission of Barbour Publishing, provided that the text does not exceed 500 words or 5 percent of the entire book, whichever is less, and that the text is not material quoted from another publisher. When reproducing text from this book, include the following credit line: "From *In His Place*, published by Barbour Publishing, Inc. Used by permission."

Scripture taken from the New King James Version®. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any similarity to actual people, organizations, and/or events is purely coincidental.

Published by Shiloh Run Press, an imprint of Barbour Publishing, Inc., P.O. Box 719, Uhrichsville, Ohio 44683, [www.shilohrunpress.com](http://www.shilohrunpress.com)

*Our mission is to publish and distribute inspirational products offering exceptional value and biblical encouragement to the masses.*



Printed in Canada.

# Acknowledgments

This book would not have been possible without the help of Jim Pence, Julie Cosgrove, Victor Oliver, Bruce Barbour, Greg Johnson, Ronald Rolheiser, Barry Grecu, John Rivenbark, and my ever-supportive and encouraging wife, Emily.

Additional support came from Maxie Dunnam, Fitz Allison, Keith Miller, George Gallup, Robert Whitlow, Cecil Murphey, Peter Lundell, Ron Hooks, Charlotte Hays, Kacky and Joyce Avant, and Bob Snyder.

# Table of Contents

Prologue . . . . .	7	Chapter 21. . . . .	153
Chapter 1. . . . .	9	Chapter 22. . . . .	161
Chapter 2. . . . .	21	Chapter 23. . . . .	165
Chapter 3. . . . .	29	Chapter 24. . . . .	169
Chapter 4. . . . .	33	Chapter 25. . . . .	179
Chapter 5. . . . .	39	Chapter 26. . . . .	185
Chapter 6. . . . .	43	Chapter 27. . . . .	189
Chapter 7. . . . .	49	Chapter 28. . . . .	205
Chapter 8. . . . .	57	Chapter 29. . . . .	209
Chapter 9. . . . .	67	Chapter 30. . . . .	213
Chapter 10. . . . .	75	Chapter 31. . . . .	219
Chapter 11. . . . .	83	Chapter 32. . . . .	229
Chapter 12. . . . .	87	Chapter 33. . . . .	235
Chapter 13. . . . .	95	Chapter 34. . . . .	241
Chapter 14. . . . .	103	Chapter 35. . . . .	253
Chapter 15. . . . .	113	Chapter 36. . . . .	261
Chapter 16. . . . .	117	Chapter 37. . . . .	265
Chapter 17. . . . .	129	Chapter 38. . . . .	271
Chapter 18. . . . .	137	Chapter 39. . . . .	275
Chapter 19. . . . .	141	Epilogue . . . . .	283
Chapter 20. . . . .	147		

# Prologue

Otis Huntington sat at a rickety wooden table and picked up a small brown bottle of sleeping pills. His hands trembled as he fumbled with the childproof cap, working it back and forth. Finally, the cap popped off and fell to the floor.

Instantly, the *click, click, click* of tiny paws sounded on the grimy tile floor. Otis's little Yorkie-mix mutt came over and sniffed the cap.

"You leave that alone, Skeeter. Y'hear?"

The scraggly wire-haired dog let out a quiet whine.

Otis poured the bottle's contents into his palm.

*About twenty-five pills. More than enough.*

He held the pills in the palm of his hand as if weighing them and then dumped them back into the bottle. He couldn't take them yet. He didn't know how quickly they would take effect, and there were still two things to do.

Otis jotted down a quick note on a piece of paper torn from a yellow legal pad then sealed it in an envelope.

He took the envelope, along with a roll of duct tape, and walked across to Mrs. Sherwood's apartment. He pulled his knobby sweater closer to his chest as the rush of autumn air whistled through the breezeway.

He tore off two short lengths of tape and secured the envelope to her front door, just below the metal numerals 212. Otis wasn't worried about waking her up. Mrs. Sherwood slept like the dead. She'd find the envelope when she came out to get her newspaper tomorrow.

Otis ran his fingers along the door frame's peeling paint. He absentmindedly pulled a few large chips loose and let them flutter to the floor, where they joined the others. The whole building needed repainting. Not his problem now.

When Otis returned to his apartment, Skeeter jumped and danced as if he hadn't seen him in months. It never ceased to amaze Otis how much this little dog seemed to love him. He picked him up and cradled him in his arms.

"You'll be all right now. She'll take good care of you."

One final task remained. Otis sat back down at the table and pulled the legal pad to him. He took his pen and began to write.

*Dear Pastor Steve. . .*



# Chapter 1

I sat on the bed and rested my head in my hands.

Jayne laid her hand on my shoulder. "I'm so sorry," she said softly. She bent down and kissed my cheek and then left me to my thoughts.

As I pulled on my sneakers, my mind replayed the phone call I had just received.

"Is this Pastor Steve Long?"

"Yes."

"This is Officer Robb with the Belvedere Police Department. Is Otis Huntington a member of your church?"

A wave of anxiety shot through me. "Yes, he is."

"We need to contact his family. Do you know any of his relatives?"

"Otis has no family." I cleared my throat, changed the phone to my other ear. "Is something wrong?"

There was a slight pause.

"Mr. Huntington was found dead in his apartment this morning."

For a few seconds, I couldn't reply. Then I choked out the words. "What happened?"

"That's still under investigation. Would you be able to come down to the hospital and identify his body?"

I swallowed hard, fighting back the emotion that flooded to the surface.

"Sure. I'll be there in about twenty minutes."

As a pastor, I had made many trips to the hospital to be with people when they were dying. And I had gotten my share of late-night phone calls telling me that a member of my congregation had died. This was the first time I had been asked to identify a body. But that's not what bothered me.

Jayne came back in, carrying coffee in a stainless steel travel mug.

"Thought you might need this," she said, handing me the mug.

"Thanks." God had chosen a great wife for me. She always anticipated my needs.

"Did they say what happened?"

I shook my head. "Only that it's under investigation."

Jayne's eyebrows furrowed. "Who would've hurt that sweet man?"

"I don't think anyone did. I'd better get over there."

I grabbed my keys and started for the door, but Jayne caught me by the arm. "Are you okay?"

I shook my head. “Not really.”



It doesn't take long to get anywhere in Belvedere, Georgia. From the city center, where Jayne and I lived, Belvedere's limits were about five miles in any direction, give or take a mile. So it only took me about ten minutes to get to the hospital.

I wheeled my pickup truck around the back of the hospital, toward the ER, and into one of the parking spots marked CLERGY. A Belvedere police cruiser was parked nearby.

Like the city where it is situated, the Belvedere Hospital is small. Only four stories. And no big morgue like you see on TV. As a matter of fact, bodies are usually sent to Atlanta for autopsies. So I didn't have to trek down to a basement and wait for a medical examiner to dramatically open a stainless-steel door and roll the deceased out of a drawer.

A uniformed police officer met me in the emergency room. His name tag—Robb—identified him as the one who had phoned me.

“Officer Robb,” I said, “I'm Stephen Long.”

We shook hands.

“Thanks for coming, Reverend. He's down here.”

We walked down a short hallway and entered Treatment Room D.

Otis lay on the table, partially covered by a sheet. He looked peaceful.

Officer Robb looked at me, arching an eyebrow and shifting from one foot to another.

I nodded. "That's Otis," I said. "Can you tell me what happened?"

"Well, as I told you on the phone, it's still under investigation, but right now it looks like a suicide. There was an empty bottle of sleeping pills on the kitchen table."

"Did he leave a note?"

Officer Robb shook his head. "Only instructions about caring for his dog. He taped those to a neighbor's door, along with a key to his apartment. She's the one who found him. She came out to get her morning paper and saw the envelope. The note didn't say anything about suicide, though. Just asked her to take care of the dog. She got worried and decided to check on him. When he didn't answer the door, she went in and found him."

Officer Robb switched directions. "You sure he doesn't have any family we can contact?"

"I'm sure. He's been coming to our church for about a year now, and he told me early on that he was alone in the world. He asked me to handle the arrangements if

something ever happened to him. Told me there wasn't anybody other than Skeeter."

"Skeeter?"

"His dog."

Officer Robb nodded. "Funny thing about that dog," he said. "He was curled up with him in his recliner when his neighbor found him. He wouldn't even leave his side when she knocked at the door." He nodded toward Otis's body. "Looks like the dog was his best friend in the world."

Those words stung. They were more accurate than the officer knew.



I sat down on the grass, on a hill just outside the hospital, watching traffic on the four-lane road that bisected Belvedere. Most of the town's new growth spread toward the west, near the interstate. The east part of town was older, although most North Georgia towns preferred the term *historic*. I had to admit, it sounded better than the more accurate descriptions: *run-down*, *abandoned*, *deteriorating*, *low-income*.

But one thing that the east and west parts of town had in common was Loop 121. It was the main east-west artery through town, and there was hardly a time of day when it



wasn't busy. Almost constantly, cars, pickups, and eighteen-wheelers rushed back and forth on this road, speeding toward their various destinations.

This spot had always been special to me. I could look to the north and see the mountains in the distance, peaceful and beautiful. I could look below me and see the hectic pace of everyday life. Somehow the balance between the two—calm in one direction and frenetic in the other—represented for me what life is all about and helped me cope with it.

As I sat there, watching the traffic, thoughts and “what-ifs” raced back and forth through my head like cars and trucks on Loop 121.

*Why'd you do it, Otis?*

If there was one person in the world I would have thought incapable of suicide, it was Otis Huntington. Although a quiet man who kept to himself, Otis never appeared to be unhappy. I saw him from time to time during the week while he did his maintenance work at the church and then virtually every Sunday, but I never picked up a hint that he might be suicidal.

In fact, Otis seemed to be one of the happiest people I knew. He didn't have much in the way of material things, especially compared to the congregation of Incarnation Church, but that didn't seem to bother him. Our church was upscale for a small-town congregation. In that sense,

Otis didn't fit in very well. He didn't dress as nicely. Most of the time he came to church wearing clothes he'd gotten from Goodwill.

But the people were always kind to him. Nobody treated him badly because he didn't fit into the proper income bracket. The church used some of its benevolence fund to help him with his bills from time to time, and I had hired him as church groundskeeper and maintenance man when he'd lost his other job.

Otis never complained. He always seemed to be in good spirits, and his positive attitude encouraged others. He never failed to talk about the Lord in his life, both in the church and outside. It was a natural thing with him. I have no idea how many people he personally led to the Lord. He certainly moved me closer to Christ.

So what went wrong? What could have pushed Otis over the edge so radically that he saw suicide as his only option?



Otis lived in the Southern Plantation apartment complex, an elegant, but absurdly inaccurate, name. The place looked nothing like that, unless perhaps Tara after the Union troops burned it.

It was one of the three oldest complexes in Belvedere,

and its age showed everywhere you looked. Potholes dotted the deteriorating pavement. All the buildings were in need of new roofs, and the amber paint peeled so badly that a sprinkling of chips littered the ground around most of them.

But the age of the complex was the least of its problems. Southern Plantation was a center of the illegal drug trade in Belvedere. The police were regular visitors to the complex, and the calls were not social.

That was quite a contrast with most of the people from Incarnation Church. Those who did go on visitation were reluctant to go to the Plantation, as they called it. Maybe they were afraid they wouldn't come out in one piece. I had made many visits there, and the thought had crossed my mind more than once.

But today as I pulled into a parking spot in front of Otis's building, fear for my personal safety was the furthest thing from my mind. I wanted—needed—answers, and I hoped that somewhere in Otis's little apartment I might find them.



The police had completed their investigation by early afternoon and released the scene. I had a key because Otis had asked me to be the executor of his estate several months

earlier. Why hadn't that given me a clue to what was going on in Otis's mind?

"Shouldn't be too hard," he'd told me. "I don't have much of anything."

He wasn't kidding about that.

I stood in the front room, looking for something but not knowing exactly what.

The tiny one-bedroom apartment was neat but sparsely furnished. An old brown sofa, leaking stuffing from the armrests, sat up against one wall of the living room. A recliner covered in a sickly shade of green vinyl occupied the opposite corner. That was where Mrs. Sherwood found Otis, according to the police.

On the kitchen table lay an assortment of bills and envelopes, carefully organized. Beside them a yellow legal pad provided a checklist of paid bills and disconnected services. Another list gave bank account details and access information. A third page contained funeral arrangements.

It was as if Otis had carefully considered each issue that someone would have to consider in dealing with his death. Otis had taken care of every detail—except one. He hadn't left an explanation.

I spent several hours going through the apartment, looking for some hint that would help me understand what happened. I found nothing. I was about to go home when

I heard a knock at the front door. I opened it and found a thin African American woman standing there holding Skeeter in her arms. As soon as Skeeter saw me, he started wiggling and whining. The woman put the little dog down, and it ran into the living room and hopped into Otis's green recliner.

"Look at that," she said. "Poor thing misses him so."

I held out my hand. "I'm Steve Long. Otis's pastor."

She nodded and shook my hand. "I'm Lonetta Sherwood. Otis told me a lot about you."

"Mrs. Sherwood, I'm struggling to understand this. Did you notice anything unusual about Otis the last few days? Anything at all?"

She shook her head and dabbed at her eyes with a lace handkerchief.

"I saw him yesterday afternoon, and he seemed fine. He told me he was going on a trip."

"Trip?"

She nodded. "And when I found the envelope on my door this morning, asking me to take care of his dog, I thought he'd just forgotten to mention it. Well, he didn't say how much to feed Skeeter, and so that's why I knocked on his door. He didn't answer, so I tried the doorknob." Her eyes filled with tears. "That's when. . ." She brought the handkerchief to her mouth and choked back a sob.



I shook my head. “I’m baffled and desperately want to understand exactly what happened. Did he really use the word *trip*?”

“Not exactly,” she said. “He told me he was going to see his best friend.”

As I left the apartment complex that day and headed back to the church, her words resonated through my mind.

*He told me he was going to see his best friend.*

Otis had revealed his planned death to her as casually as if he were announcing his vacation travel plans. An eerie feeling crawled down my spine that told me I would soon learn why Otis took his own life, and I wouldn’t like the answer. How could I prepare the congregation for the news?



## Chapter 2

The letter arrived in the church mail, one day after Otis's death. It swept over me with the force of a tsunami.

Betty Ferguson, our church secretary, brought it to me with several other pieces of mail. The envelope was hand addressed in Otis's unruly scrawl. I tore it open and pulled out a sheet of yellow legal paper, obviously taken from the same pad he'd used to make out his final to-do lists. On the paper, Otis wrote:

*Dear Pastor Steve,*

*I want to thank you for all you've done for me.*

*I'm sorry for doing this. I know I'm letting you down. I've tried to hold on, but I just can't stand the loneliness anymore.*

*I know Jesus will forgive me.*

*I'm tired, and I want to go be with Him.*

*Love,*

*Otis*

*Loneliness?* The word jolted me. Otis was an active member of our church. He was there every time the doors were open. How could a dear guy like Otis have been lonely?

A flood of guilt washed over me, followed by a host of what-ifs. What if I had spent more time with Otis? What if I had probed a little deeper the last time I saw him looking sad? What if I had visited with him the day he called me. . . the day before he killed himself? I ran a mental check of my last few interactions with him, but I couldn't think of a single thing that might have tipped me off to his intentions.

Nevertheless, the guilt remained. Why didn't I make Otis a priority? Why wasn't I more proactive with him? And how was it possible for someone to be a member of Incarnation Church and yet feel lonely and isolated? Most of all, where could I find answers to all of these questions?



Every pastor needs a confidant, someone outside his church with whom he can share his deepest frustrations, hurts, and questions. Someone he can go to when the wheels are coming off and everything around him is falling apart. Someone he can trust not to give him the easy answer but to show tough love.

There is a problem with confiding in other pastors. As strange and ungodly as it may seem, there is often competition between the clergy in any town. Any problem we have can seem like a weakness when we consider sharing it with another pastor. You would think that other pastors would be the logical ones with whom to share your concerns because they can be expected to understand your trials and tribulations, but I was reluctant to do it. Pride.

Philip Treadway wasn't a pastor. In fact, he wasn't even a practicing Christian. He was a guy who had faced disappointment with God and wanted nothing to do with the church. Yet, strange as it may seem, I felt more comfortable talking to him than just about anyone other than my wife.

When Jayne and I first came to Belvedere, Incarnation Church was not in good shape financially, and for a time I had to be a bivocational pastor. Philip Treadway was good friends with Incarnation's board chairman, Clifton Stoner. Clifton knew that Philip needed someone to help at his lumberyard and set up a meeting between us.

"Who knows? Maybe you'll be able to get him to come to church," Clifton said, winking. "He hasn't been inside one for twenty years. Not since his boy was killed by a drunk driver."

I don't know exactly what it was, but Philip and I hit it off from the moment we met. Maybe it was his sardonic,

humorous outlook on the world. Or perhaps it was because he sharpened me by challenging my assumptions and beliefs. For whatever reason, it wasn't long before Philip was more than my part-time boss; he was my best friend.

Several years ago, the church raised my salary to the point where I didn't need a second job. But even though I no longer worked at Philip's place, that was where I went when I needed to process things.

I knew two things about Philip. One, he would tell me the truth. And two, I could trust him.



Philip Treadway smiled at me from behind the counter as I walked through his little store. I was constantly amazed at his ability to stay in business in this day of places like the mega home improvement chains that take up a city block. Yet despite these gargantuan competitors, his lumberyard plugged along and continued to turn a profit. The building was long and narrow, had no air-conditioning, and showed its age everywhere. There wasn't much flash, and Philip catered primarily to contractors rather than do-it-yourselfers.

Of course there was something else that Philip's business offered that the big boys couldn't quite match. There was a friendly, you might say homey, atmosphere at

Treadway Building Supplies. When you went into Philip's store, it was more like going to the local café. There were three stools in front of the counter at the back of the store, and usually one was occupied by a contractor, a salesman, or just somebody who stopped in to visit. And there was always coffee.

Philip Treadway was a large man. I am fairly tall, but standing next to him, I looked short. With his muscular build, shaved head, and goatee, he also looked like he could be a bouncer. In spite of this, I had never met a gentler giant.

Philip stood, and his massive hand swallowed mine when we shook hands.

"Haven't seen you in a while," he said. "I thought maybe you'd forgotten about me. What brings you here today?"

"First things first," I said as I sat down on a stool. "Coffee."

"It's been busy. You get the dregs today." He poured a cup of coal-black liquid from a nearly empty carafe and handed it to me.

I took a sip and shuddered.

"Powerful stuff, huh?" he said with a grin.

"Much more of that and I won't sleep for a week."

"So what's up?"

I looked down into my Styrofoam coffee cup and back

at Philip. "One of our members committed suicide."

Philip winced and shook his head. "Who?"

"Otis Huntington."

Philip knew many of the people at Incarnation Church. He knew Otis particularly well. Otis had worked for him for several years.

"I'm sorry. Did he leave a note?"

I handed Philip the letter. "This came in today's mail."

Philip's brow furrowed as he read the note. "Does the rest of the church know?"

I nodded. I had called Clifton Stoner, the board chairman, the night before and asked him to pass on the news.

"How are you handling it?" he asked.

"Not very well."

Philip shook his head. "That's not what I mean. How are you going to handle it with the congregation? How are you going to explain it to the church at the service tomorrow?"

"Explain it?"

"Look, I'm not trying to be sarcastic, but isn't suicide a major no-no for you guys? Do you really think that people aren't going to put a negative spin on this? Look at it as a failure on Otis's part?"

"Why would they blame Otis?"

"So they don't have to blame themselves."

Philip was my friend, but he had touched a raw nerve. I



raised my hands. “Look, man, I didn’t come in here to start an argument. I’m still processing this myself.”

“I know that,” he said, not letting my response ruffle him. “But this is something you need to think about. You’re the pastor. The buck stops with you. When you stand behind your pulpit tomorrow, your congregation is going to want answers. They’re going to want you to tell them that Otis’s suicide is not their fault.”

I raised my voice. “It isn’t their fault.” *Why do I feel so defensive?*

“Are you sure of that?” Philip shot back. “Are you certain that the church did everything it could to prevent this?”

I felt my face flush. “How could we prevent something we didn’t even know about? Otis never told me or anybody else that he planned to kill himself.”

Philip paused and pierced me with his gaze. “Didn’t tell you? Or couldn’t?”

“What do you mean?”

He leaned across the counter. “All I’m asking is this: How can a man like Otis be a part of your church yet die of loneliness?”

