

Just Because I'm Blind Do You Think I Cannot See?

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## **Introduction**

“I have a daughter, a very beautiful daughter. She likes to buy fixer-upper houses with which I would help her, only now I am not as young as I used to be”.

Chuck Smith, Founder and Senior Pastor of the world-wide Calvary Chapel movement where I worship in Costa Mesa, California, introduced this little homily into one of his Sunday morning messages. I believe it was precisely these human-interest vignettes that became the inspiration for my stories – with one major difference.

Because Pastor Chuck essentially speaks to those of the household of faith, it is entirely appropriate for him to give an erudite, Biblically centered message, with only the odd human-interest tale in between. What if I were to turn it round the other way, and write a human-interest story with only the occasional lesson from the Bible included, but with full chapter and verse references at the end, covering in the aggregate all 66 books in the Bible? Might I not be making a small but personal contribution to the Great Commission referred to in Matthew 28:19-20? Might I not also be honoring the mission statement of my Alma Mater, Biola University in La Mirada, California, to impact the world for the Lord Jesus Christ? I must say the whole idea appealed to me immensely.

This book is the result.

I purposely set out to try and make the stories intriguing, hoping thereby to encourage the reader to look up the Bible references under ‘Further reading’ at the end. In this way would I seek to lead the lost of this world on a journey that would end in their acceptance of Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.

Thus, in each of the total of twenty-six stories, one for each letter of the alphabet, there is only one named character and no references to times or places. By making you,

the reader, rely on your imagination in this way, as opposed to identifying with facts with which you might already be familiar, I hope to make it easier for you as you begin your study of the Bible.

My prayer for you, and for all whom you hold dear, is that your life from this day forth will be all that God had in mind for you when He first thought of you.

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## **If You So Choose**

There wasn't a vacant seat to be had at a recent meeting of our school board. Fireworks were clearly expected and fireworks duly exploded, sparked off by the objection I raised from the body of the hall.

The chairman of the board of governors had called the meeting in response to parents' concerns at what they saw as an increasingly liberal interpretation of the curriculum by the head of the department of religious studies. At the conclusion of the meeting I had the very real but wholly unexpected privilege of being offered that self-same position.

I could tell from the growing display of restlessness from other parents around me that the speaker was straying too far from the fundamentals of Christianity. How much worse would it get? Enough was enough: someone had to act and that someone was me.

"I object, Mr. Chairman", I said audaciously, rising to my feet.

Immediately, albeit slowly at first but quickly gathering momentum, applause broke out from all sides, easily drowning the response of the liberal minority.

On being acknowledged by the chairman, I strode to the podium, waited for the by now prolonged applause to die down, and began to speak.

"I would rather live my life believing there was a god, and when I died find out there wasn't, than live my life believing there wasn't a god, and when I died find out there was.

"This is so important, I'm going to repeat it.

“I would rather live my life believing there was a god, and when I died find out there wasn’t, than live my life believing there wasn’t a god, and when I died find out there was.

“Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for the opportunity to take issue with the speaker.

“I do not share your view, Alan, that miracles can happen but forgiveness of sins cannot. I understand you base your view on the fact that miraculous events can be witnessed whereas forgiveness of sins cannot.

“There is a wonderful story about this in the Bible. Some people brought a sick man to Jesus to be healed, but because of the throng, they could not get into the house where Jesus was teaching. So they lowered the sick man, still on his bed, through the roof. When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the sick man, “Your sins are forgiven you.” But some religious leaders reasoned among themselves saying, “How can anyone but God forgive sins?” When Jesus perceived their thoughts He asked them whether it was easier to say, “Your sins are forgiven you, or rise up and walk?” Jesus said this so that people would know He had power to forgive sins. Jesus then said to the sick man, “Arise, pick up your bed and go home”, which he did.

“Alan, reverting to my opening statement, I wonder if you are familiar with the tale of the teacher who answered her young pupil’s inquiry as to the existence of God by asking if he could see the tree outside the classroom window. The boy said he could. The teacher then asked if the boy could see the bright blue sky. Again the boy said he could. The teacher next asked if the boy could see God. The boy said he couldn’t. The teacher responded by saying that therefore God did not exist.

“The little girl sitting next to the boy put her hand up and asked if she could pose some similar questions to her classmate. With a smirk on her face the teacher said she could.

“The girl asked the boy if he could see the tree outside the classroom window. The boy said he could. The girl then asked if the boy could see the bright blue sky. Again the boy said he could. The girl next asked if the boy could see the teacher’s brain. The boy said he couldn’t. Quickly the girl responded by saying that therefore she did not have one.

“It is not recounted what happened to the little girl but it is just possible the teacher - and you, Alan – are on your way to committing the unpardonable sin.

“Let me make myself absolutely clear. In case you are not aware, there is one sin, and one sin only, which God does not forgive. In His infinite mercy and loving kindness towards us, God has made it possible for even the worst of sinners to find redemption through the atoning blood of His only begotten Son, Lord Jesus Christ – with one exception. That exception is blaspheming against the Holy Spirit.

“Put simply, blaspheming against the Holy Spirit refers to knowing of the existence of Jesus Christ and then rejecting Him. Obviously if someone had never heard of Jesus, an ever loving God would not hold that against them. An example would be a member of a primitive tribe whom missionaries had not reached. But if we, knowing full well who Jesus is, choose to reject Him, we have committed the unpardonable sin.

“Committing the unpardonable sin means we will be eternally – note that word, eternally - separated from God, situated forever beyond His ability to forgive us our sins.

“The Bible tells the story of an unnamed rich man and a beggar called Lazarus who was laid at the rich man’s gate, hoping to be fed with the crumbs that fell from the rich man’s table. In the fullness of time both men died. The angels carried Lazarus to Abraham’s side in heaven, while the rich man went to hell. In his torment, the rich man asked Abraham if Lazarus could come and dip the tip of his finger in water and cool the rich man’s tongue, “for I am tormented in this flame”. The answer was no. The rich man then asked if someone could be sent to warn his five brothers lest they too “come into this place of torment.” Again, the answer was no: they have Moses and the prophets to listen to for advice and teaching.

“The story has some very telling – and chilling - points about it. In both heaven and hell we are fully conscious of our surroundings. In heaven we get to be with the Lord and to be seen and recognized by those in hell. In hell we can call out for help but to no avail. We had our chance, an abundance of chances in fact, to accept the Lord Jesus Christ while on earth but chose not to and now we must pay for it.

“I can hear you say, Alan, that these are events that cannot be witnessed and hence are of no significance to you. Perhaps you have heard of Voltaire, the great French writer who was also, tragically, an outspoken atheist. It has been said of him that, on his deathbed, he realized he was going to hell, even saying, “I wish I had never been born.” Such was the extent of his suffering, the nurse who was assigned to look after him in his last days vowed she would never again undertake the duty of ministering to an ‘infidel’. She was true to her word. These circumstances are well documented. I commend them to your reading, Alan, should you still find it necessary.

“The Bible tells us that, in heaven, God will wipe away all tears; there will be no more death, no sorrow, no crying, and no pain, because the former things will have passed away. When that time comes, Alan, would you not wish to echo the thoughts of Sydney Carton and say, “It is a far, far better rest I go to than I have ever known?”

“If it is not too late for you, Alan, because, by the grace of God you may not yet have committed the unpardonable sin, you can know for sure you are on your way to heaven by taking just five simple steps. These can be taken right here, right now, if you so choose.

“First, you must understand that God loves you. The Bible tells us that God loved the world so much – that means you, me, everyone – that He gave His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, so that all who believe in Him should not perish but instead have everlasting life.

“Second, you must understand that everyone of us – there are absolutely no exceptions - is a sinner. The Bible records that all of us have sinned and so fallen short of the glory of God.

“Third, you must understand that sin has a price that has to be paid. The Bible tells us that the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

“Fourth, you must understand that Jesus Christ died to pay the price of your sin. The Bible records that God commended His love toward us in that, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

“Fifth and last, you must ask in prayer for Jesus Christ to be your Savior and then claim His promise of eternal life. According to the Bible, whoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.

“The choice is yours, Alan. If you have not made it already, I urge you to do so and to do so quickly, for none of us knows the day or the hour of our demise.

“To conclude, there is an interesting tale in the Bible of a man who had so much grain he vowed he would pull down his barns and build larger ones. Then he would say to his soul, “You have much laid up for many years; take life easy, eat, drink and be merry.” What he didn’t know was that the Lord would require his soul that very night.

“Alan, if God required your soul this very night, to where would it fly – to heaven or to hell, to everlasting life with God or eternal damnation without Him? If you cannot even now make up your mind, will you be saying to yourself as you leave this place tonight, I would rather live my life believing there was a god, and when I died find out there wasn’t, or, I would rather live my life believing there wasn’t a god, and when I died find out there was?”

For further reading: Mark 3:28-30; Matthew 12:31-32; Luke 5:18-25, 16:19-31;

Revelation 21:4; John 3:16; Romans 3:23, 6:23, 5:8, 10:13; Luke 12:16-20

## **“Just because I’m Blind Do You Think I Cannot See?”**

For a number of years I lived next to a family of five. I remember it always impressed me how well Belinda, the daughter, coped with her blindness. Our families worshipped at the same church, and while I cannot say we were close, we promised to keep in touch when my job required me to move overseas. Eventually, however, we even stopped exchanging cards at Christmas.

On taking early retirement, I decided to look up old friends and acquaintances before settling down, and that is how our two families became reunited. While I had been blessed with the opportunity to travel the world, including living and working in many different countries, I was touched beyond measure by the story my erstwhile neighbors had to tell, and which had caused them never even to think about moving from the family home. Here, as best I can recall it in their own words, is what they had to say. It began in all innocence with a simple question posed by the father of the family.

“Belinda, what would you like for your 18<sup>th</sup> birthday?”

“The answer to a question,” came the immediate reply.

“No, seriously; your mother and I would like to get you something special to mark the occasion.”

“Yes, dear, and if you tell us now, or at least think about it, we’ll have time.”

“No, thank you,” said Belinda quietly, “the only thing I want is the answer to just one question.”

“Then why not tell us now,” said her mother somewhat impatiently, “why wait until your birthday?”

“I have other plans for that day,” Belinda replied, getting up and going to her room.

“I wonder what all that was about,” said her mother, fishing for the remote.

Belinda’s father made no reply, but a feeling of uneasiness crept over him. From time to time, he would gently ask his daughter whether she was ready to ask that all-important question, but quoting Melville’s character, Bartleby, she would reply, “I would prefer not to.”

On the day of Belinda’s birthday, when she, her parents and her two brothers were at dinner, her father asked her again if she was ready to ask her question.

“I would prefer not to; after dinner, please, if you don’t mind,” came the reply.

The meal over, Belinda went to her room as usual. A short while later she came downstairs again and, unusually for her, stood outside the room where the rest of the family was seated watching television. After a moment she announced that she was ready to ask her question.

“What is it, dear?” her mother called over her shoulder.

“Would you mind coming out here for a moment?” came the reply.

Her parents got up and went to the hallway. They were surprised to see their daughter dressed ready to go out.

“What is it, dear?” her mother repeated.

Making sure she had the full attention of both her parents, Belinda asked quietly, “When you decided to buy this house six years ago, why did you not ask me which room I would like?”

Her dumbfounded parents just stared at her. Eventually her mother stammered something about buying houses being the sort of thing parents decided.

“But you asked both my brothers which rooms they would like,” responded Belinda.

After an awkward pause, Belinda’s father said quietly that, if he didn’t ask her which room she wanted he couldn’t now remember why, but he was sorry if it had upset her.

“Just because I’m blind do you think I cannot see?” retorted Belinda.

So saying, she opened the front door behind her, and in what was obviously a carefully rehearsed manoeuvre, a burly taxi driver stepped into the house. Without a moment’s hesitation, he turned right, opened the closet door and picked up two suitcases hidden behind some long coats. Tucking one suitcase under his huge arm, he gently took Belinda by the elbow and steered her outside the house, down the path and into his waiting, bright yellow taxicab. And then they were gone.

Later that evening, as her father was locking up the house before retiring for the night, he heard the sound of music coming from Belinda’s room. He thought something must be wrong because the same words kept being repeated over and over again. He recognized them as coming from an old Beatles’ song: “She’s leaving home after living alone for so many years.” Her father sat down heavily and listened to the constantly repeated words. He was still there, listening to them, when his wife found him next morning.

A great many years later, when Belinda was teaching Braille at an institute for the blind, a colleague asked her if she had caught the tail end of the six o’clock news that

morning. She said she hadn't. He then asked her if she had ever lived at such and such an address. She said she had.

“Well,” her colleague replied, “because of your unusual last name I wondered if the message was meant for you. It was one of those SOS calls that are sometimes broadcast. This one asked if someone with your name who was last known living at your old address could call the police as their brothers were dangerously ill.”

Belinda hoped the emotion she felt inside was not displayed on the outside. Over the many years since she had left home, she had often thought about her parents and brothers but had never made any attempt to contact them. While her father was soft-spoken, kind and gentle, Belinda resented the fact that he had effectively allowed her mother to rule the roost. Her mother was well meaning but did not know what it was to show any real affection for her immediate family, while effortlessly endearing herself to others. Her brothers, well, they had each other and in the eyes of their parents could do no wrong.

When Belinda left work at the end of the day, later than usual because of a heavy caseload, for once she didn't want to go home, even though it was raining heavily. As she walked slowly and carefully the short distance to her apartment, she heard someone say, “Jesus loves you all the more when it's raining.”

Belinda stopped. No one had ever told her with such sincerity and conviction that she was loved.

“You see, He wouldn't want you to slip and hurt yourself.” Belinda did not move, her umbrella keeping the worst of the rain off her.

“Won’t you come in out of the rain for a minute?” asked an inviting voice, “we have coffee and biscuits and it’s nice and warm inside.”

Belinda allowed herself to be escorted into what she took to be a church hall. Her host plied her with refreshments, sat her down by a roaring fire and asked her what she was doing out on so dreadful a night. The hot coffee, the nourishing biscuits, the warmth of the fire, the cheerful sound of voices all around her, and the unobtrusive attention of her host, all combined to cause Belinda to lower the guard she had so carefully built around herself for more years than she could remember. She replied truthfully that, after a long day at work, she didn’t feel like going home, the radio message she’d been told about preying on her mind.

“Would you like to talk about it?” her host asked gently. And Belinda did, going all the way back to her reasons for leaving home so many years ago. She had never done this before and it felt good finally to get it off her chest.

“Should we make that call?” inquired her host after Belinda had been silent for a while. Belinda nodded quietly. In a matter of moments her host lifted her to her feet and led her out to the street where a police car drew up, its emergency lights flashing. Once seated inside, the officer said the journey to the hospital would take about five and half-hours but she would improve on that if she possibly could.

Throughout the long journey, Belinda’s host told her about a loving, heavenly Father who taught us that we must have forgiveness in our hearts, because only then would He be able to forgive us. Certainly, those who had wronged us should first ask for our forgiveness, but then we should be willing to extend it, on as many as seventy times seven occasions if they were sincere in seeking it.

Belinda listened with growing interest as her host told her it was often the case that those who did not forgive others caused actual harm to themselves, while those who had wronged them were not even aware they had done so. Belinda's host urged her, if there was still time, to be reconciled to her brothers and her parents, to forgive them in her heart for whatever wrong she felt they had done to her, and to free herself from the lonely life she had chosen to inflict upon herself.

“And if there isn't time?” Belinda had asked.

“If you sincerely forgive those who have wronged you,” came the reply, “even if you cannot be with them, God will surely forgive you the wrongs you yourself have done. And in so doing, He will bring you such comfort as will then enable you to comfort others, thereby banishing loneliness from your life. The alternative, putting yourself beyond God's forgiveness, was unthinkable.”

Belinda's host had then told her the story of Jesus' response to His disciples as to whether a man who was born blind suffered that way because of either his own sin or that of his parents. The answer was neither: God had a plan for that man's life that He was working out, just as He had a plan for Belinda's life that He was even now working out.

The hospital security staff were waiting for the police car as it pulled up sharply at the emergency entrance. The nurse who was with them said there might still be time if they hurried. Belinda's brothers had been in a severe car accident and had now been in intensive care for nearly twenty-four hours. The next hour or so would be critical for their survival. In the meanwhile, visitors were not allowed. There was no word about their parents.

Not long afterwards, another nurse with a drawn face came out to say she was sorry but the patients were fading fast and were not expected to recover. Belinda was invited into their room, and as their lives slowly ebbed away, she spoke quietly and humbly of the forgiveness she offered to them and their parents, there at her brothers' bedside. She thanked them for the good times they had had together and said she was sorry for the bad times.

Belinda became aware of a quiet sobbing in the background. For the first time she sensed the presence of the members of the surgical team gathered in the room to say farewell to two patients they had fought so long and hard to save. Later she was to learn they had done the same for her mother in this very room three years earlier.

With a composure that was masterful to behold, Belinda hugged and thanked everyone in the room for all their efforts to save her brothers. In so doing, she brought to all a measure of comfort that helped assuage the grief they bore so bravely. Her expression of heartfelt gratitude included the police officer who had driven so expertly in atrocious conditions to bring her to the hospital in record time. The officer stood silently by the door, before offering to take her charge home again whenever she was ready. Belinda sensed that she too had been crying.

Eventually Belinda was left alone with just her host. Looking down at her brothers through sightless eyes, she reminisced with them some of the good times they had had together as children. For the first time she regretted leaving home, and yet she had planned it all so carefully, even leaving the music on in her room for the family to listen to after she was gone.

“She’s leaving home...”; Belinda’s voice drifted away into silence.

“...after living alone for so many years.” It was the soft spoken, kind and gentle voice of her host who finished the sentence for her. As Belinda turned to face her father, she found that she could see.

For further reading: Matthew 6:14-15, 18:21-22; Luke 11:1-4; 2 Corinthians 1:3-4; John 9:1-3

## **The Envelope**

As a lawyer, I am sometimes asked which has been the most interesting case I have handled. The one that almost always comes to mind is one I call 'The Envelope'. I like to tell about it by stating at the outset that it gave me no pleasure to open the envelope, for I knew as clearly as the day, seventeen years ago, what the note inside had said.

It had all begun when I attended an investment seminar given by an internationally renowned figure in the world of finance.

By way of introduction he had asked us all to turn round, look out the back window and locate the mansion standing atop a small hill with a commanding view of the ocean. When we had done so, and turned back to face the speaker, he announced, "I bought that house yesterday."

After allowing those words to sink in, he turned to the person at the end of the front row to his left and asked her to whom she made out her first check at the end of the month when payments had to be made. He proceeded to ask everyone in the front row the same question. Answers included the landlord, the mortgage company, "my wife", and so on. When all had responded, the speaker said the first check he wrote out at the end of each month was to himself, adding, "That is how I came to buy that mansion yesterday and why you are here today."

He then addressed the occupants of the second row, asking each of them in turn how many business suits they had. The largest number was five. He said, "I have thirty-one, so that I can travel the world conducting seminars such as this for a whole month without having to worry about my wardrobe."

Next it was the turn of the third row, the subject, the number of neckties each possessed. Quite a few respondents didn't know, but none approached the hundred the speaker said he possessed, "so that I can make allowances for cultural differences in the course of my world travels".

The presentation continued in like vein for what seemed to me to be an inordinate length of time. Eventually, the speaker asked if anyone in the audience had any questions for him. When it looked as if no one would answer, I stood up, surrounded by the well-annotated books and files I had taken out of my briefcase, hoping I looked every inch a credit to my profession.

Picking up and opening one of my files as if to start a formal interrogation, I asked the speaker, "How many times have you been divorced?"

"Why, three, if that's of any relevance at all", came the reply.

"How many children and stepchildren do you have?" I asked next.

"Three of each actually, but what's that to you?" retorted the speaker, clearly put out by my questions.

"Is it the case you've lived alone these past three years?" I continued.

"Yes, but where precisely are you going with your highly personal questions?" demanded the speaker.

"I wanted you to compare what you obviously see as great success when measured in terms of real estate, business suits and neckties, with the number of homes you've broken, lives you've ruined and children you can no longer call your own." I had clearly touched a nerve as the speaker's self-assurance crumbled before us.

“One last question – perhaps,” I said, reaching down into my briefcase and withdrawing a sheaf of newspapers which I then held conspicuously in front of me for all to see. “Do you have the funds with which to mount a vigorous defense against the accusations of fraud reported throughout today’s foreign press?”

The speaker slumped down into his chair, nearly missing it altogether in his haste to be seated.

After a moment or two’s silence, I made my way to the front of the audience and told them the real reason for my being at the seminar today.

As a lawyer and accomplished investor, I had followed the speaker’s career with unusual interest, knowing full well the accusations that had been made against him overseas. Had he of made a clean breast of things today, I might well have kept quiet. When it became obvious he was not going to do so, I felt compelled to let everyone know, sooner rather than later, at what cost the speaker had amassed his fortune and that, in so doing, he had developed a darker side to his nature than was generally known. In the event, everyone left the seminar once the organizers had promised a full refund to all paying participants.

A week later, my secretary asked if I would take a call from ‘the speaker at the seminar you went to last week’. Instantly aware, I replied I most certainly would. My caller identified himself as Charles and asked if I would mount a vigorous defense against the accusations of fraud that had since been brought against him. We agreed to meet the following afternoon.

I asked Charles to go over his entire investment career, omitting no detail however small. By the end, it was hard even for me to determine whether he was

motivated by greed or malicious intent to deprive others of their funds. I mentioned this to Charles. He said that was one of the reasons he had approached me: to make the best possible case out of his particular circumstances. He also said I would most certainly know more than anyone else about his case: how it was to be presented was up to me.

I told Charles that, if I were to take the case, he would have to accept the fact that my belief system was the very opposite of his. Where he believed in divorce, I believed that those whom God had brought together no one should separate. Where he appeared to have scant regard for his children, I acknowledged that children were the pride of their fathers and grandchildren the crown of their father's old age. Where Charles had constantly striven for more and more, I knew what it was to be content in every situation. Where he had had even less regard for the feelings of others, I believed that you should treat people as you would wish them to treat you. And so I continued, while Charles appeared to listen attentively. When I had finished, he said he saw no problem with our respective differences, given that our relationship would be that of lawyer and client.

I asked Charles if he had the funds to repay in full with interest, all those whom it was claimed he had defrauded. Having seen the press reports, he stated without hesitation that he did. I said therein lay the grounds for a possible defense. While a jury was always likely to be predisposed towards the underdog, they could be expected to be at least somewhat favorably disposed towards a defendant if restitution was to be made in full. At this observation Charles brightened considerably.

I warned Charles he would have to declare his assets in full without holding even the smallest amount back. To reinforce my point, I told him the biblical story of the husband and wife who had both died where they stood when they had lied in saying the

amounts they had brought to certain apostles were all they had to declare. In Charles' case, death would instead be a long prison sentence. I could see the prospect of prison was anathema to him. He readily agreed to make a full disclosure of all his assets. I got the impression they were considerably greater than the sums he was alleged to owe.

On Charles' repeated assurances that our differing belief systems would not jepodize our professional relationship and that he would disclose his assets in full, I agreed to take on his case. It was then I wrote a note to myself and placed it in a sealed envelope with my case notes.

As I was nearing the end of my closing argument at Charles' trial, the body language of the jury suggesting we had a good case to answer, the door behind the judge opened slowly and quietly to admit four law enforcement officers, three in uniform. On a nod from the bench to the bailiff, the uniformed officers circled the courtroom and took up their places on either side of and behind Charles; as he was seated at a table, he was thus prevented from moving in any direction.

On a second nod from the judge, the plain-clothes officer went to the bailiff and handed him a single sheet of paper which the bailiff then presented to the judge.

After reading the paper, the judge ordered that Charles be remanded in the custody of the uniformed officers; that both counsel meet the judge in his chambers immediately, and that the case be adjourned until 10 o'clock the following morning.

On entering the judge's chambers, both counsel were handed a copy of the paper. It was a letter from the state attorney general confirming receipt of information relating to previously undisclosed bank accounts overseas that Charles had tried to hide. He was subsequently sentenced to twenty-five years in prison and died seventeen years later.

It was when I received news of his death and had opened my file to record it that I saw the envelope. The note I had written inside was a direct quote from the Bible. It read, “It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the gates of heaven.” It gave me no pleasure to open the envelope.

For further reading: Matthew 19:3-6; Proverbs 17:6; Philippians 4:11; Luke 6:31; Acts 5:1-10; Matthew 19:24

## The Second Job

One of the many things I recall my father telling me never to forget was that, in responding to others, we might be the only Jesus they have ever known. I was recently reminded of these words when a business acquaintance told me of her need to find a second job: in fact, that was how our very first conversation got started.

“I have to get a second job. Try as we might, my husband and I just cannot make ends meet. I read the other day that, to be able to live indoors, you have to have two jobs. Well, between us both, we already have two jobs, but with two young children it seems to us you need at least three jobs.”

I had first seen Dawn through the window of her office which was in the next building to ours. You couldn't fail to notice her. She was so effervescently cheerful it was infectious. We would wave to each other gleefully whenever I passed by, or as she was seated at lunch with her colleagues at the communal tables outside.

One day, as I returned to the office late in the afternoon, I saw Dawn sitting alone at one of the tables. She looked as if the problems of the whole world had suddenly descended on her usually happy features.

“What's happened to Miss Sunshine today?” I asked, giving of my cheerful best, “is there anything I can do to help?”

That was when she told me of her need for a second job. She also told me that, if she got one, she would not be able to take her young son to football practice or her little daughter to music lessons. It was in the course of that brief conversation – our first – that she told me her name was Dawn.

Regrettably, a prior appointment meant I could not stay long, but I promised Dawn I would look for a second job for her in the course of my travels. I also told her I would do something else much, much more powerful: I would pray about her needs. I knew nothing about her beliefs, or even if she had any, but I remembered how the Bible urges us to come boldly to the throne of God that we may receive His mercy as well as find grace to help in time of need. Thus, I had no compunction in letting Dawn know that I would be asking God to bless her abundantly above all she could ask or hope. Dawn gave me an inquiring look that emboldened me to ask her to remember just these few words until we were next in touch; “The Lord’s my Shepherd, I have all I need.” “I have all I need, Dawn,” I repeated, “for now, hold on tightly to those words.”

I did not let Dawn down. Wherever my travels took me, I asked about job opportunities, bringing back application forms whenever I could. But when I took her need to the Lord in prayer, I told our Heavenly Father that I did so only to keep my word to Dawn, not because my heart was truly into His granting me the prayer I asked of Him. I just felt so strongly that a loving Father would find a better way to meet her needs. After all, it was God’s beloved Son, Jesus Christ, who had said, “Let the little children come to me; don’t forbid them, for the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these”. Would Jesus really want a mother not to be able to take her young son to football practice or her little daughter to music lessons? I didn’t think so.

I also remembered from the Bible that, if we need wisdom, we should ask God who gives generously to all without finding fault. But when we ask, we must truly believe He will answer: we must not doubt, because whoever doubts is like a wave of the

sea, blown and tossed by the wind. In such circumstances, we have no right to think we will receive anything from the Lord.

Furthermore, I knew the Bible also taught that the wisdom God gives us is first pure, then peace loving, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good works, unwavering, and without hypocrisy. And those who plant seeds in peace will reap in goodness. And so I asked God for wisdom in meeting Dawn's needs as I laid them at the foot of the cross where Jesus died, knowing they could not be in better or safer hands.

Exactly two weeks later, the receptionist at the office told me that 'Dawn from next door' would like a quick word. She had never done this before. I all but raced out to see her. Dawn's smile lit up the entire office.

"Won't keep you," she said breathlessly, "I'll be waiting outside for you when you get off work. Cancel any appointments you may have. "Great things He has done" ". And with that infectious grin from ear to ear she was gone.

I won't pretend I was able to concentrate too closely on work for the rest of the day. I knew with heartfelt thanksgiving and barely contained excitement that a miracle had taken place and I longed to know what it was.

Leaving work punctually, I headed for the communal tables expecting Dawn to be waiting for me. And there she was – with her husband, their young son, their little daughter and a beautifully laid out meal on a hard concrete table.

"I've made us all an early dinner," was Dawn's heartwarming greeting, after which she introduced me to her family and asked if I would like to join them in giving thanks for the food. Grace was sung holding hands except for the little daughter who

accompanied us on the recorder. It was an enchanting way to begin what proved to be the happiest of times spent together.

I listened entranced as Dawn explained that a senior colleague in the office had announced that she would be leaving soon to start a family. Dawn had been offered her colleague's job which represented a sizeable promotion with increased pay and benefits. Without my having to ask, Dawn said the extra income would mean she wouldn't have to look for a second job and, yes, she would be able to take her young son to football practice and her little daughter to music lessons.

When I was finally able to get a word in edgeways, I told Dawn how I had loyally asked God in prayer for that second job for her, but also that I had asked Him for wisdom in meeting her needs since I felt sure He had a better way of doing so.

“And “Great things He has done” ”, said Dawn, smiling broadly. “You see, it wasn't just that you said you'd help me find that second job, you said you'd pray about it. Now I didn't know how to pray at that time, but I did know I wanted to learn all I could as quickly as I could about a shepherd who would see that I would have all I need.”

Dawn went on to say that, after our last encounter, she recalled a Christian bookstore near her home where she had once bought a card. She remembered how kind the staff had been. She stopped at the store on her way home and asked a very helpful assistant how she could learn all about, “The Lord's my Shepherd, I have all I need.” She was told that was the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm in the Holy Bible, a copy of which the assistant helped Dawn to find. They had then read the psalm together. Noting Dawn's enthusiasm for God's Word, the assistant urged her to read and study it faithfully, to pray every day and to find a Bible-teaching church where Dawn could worship, fellowship and be of service.

Dawn admitted quietly she didn't know how to pray or of a church where she felt comfortable going with her family for the first time.

The assistant told Dawn about the church she herself attended and said she would be glad to take Dawn and her family there next Sunday. The church was large and welcoming with something spiritual to offer for everybody. There were four services on Sundays, one on Saturday evening, and Bible studies every day of the week, all with childcare provided. There were also support groups, prayer meetings – especially helpful for Dawn, the assistant had volunteered – film evenings, retreats, missionary opportunities, even schools and a Bible college; in short, concluded the assistant, “I have all I need” just about summed up everything the church had to offer Dawn and her family.

Accepting the assistant's kind offer, Dawn and her family, dressed in their Sunday best, went to church the following Sunday and freely and happily confess it to have been a life-changing experience.

Dawn spoke excitedly about seeing children and even babies being dedicated to the Lord; singing uplifting hymns along with a fine choir; participating in responsive reading of a psalm, and listening to a stirring message about goodness and love following her all the days of her life. “That message could have been written for me alone,” said Dawn with considerable feeling.

She and her husband had gladly responded to the altar call at the end of the message, when they had received prayer and the gift of salvation through Jesus Christ, “that great Shepherd of the sheep”. They had chosen a Bible study on Mondays and a prayer group on Thursdays, while Dawn had also put her name down to be of service in

Sunday school. Already the whole family felt blessed beyond measure and all this even before news of the promotion in Dawn's office had broken.

With Dawn's promotion, goodness and love had already started to follow her and her family. It was truly a blessing to see them acknowledging God's loving kindness towards them.

As the children's bedtime approached, Dawn said she had to be on her way, but she wanted to give the last word to her young son who was keen to recite a poem he had been taught at Sunday school. Dawn said the words captured most beautifully the valuable lessons she and her family had experienced in just these past two weeks:

Said the robin to the sparrow

“I would really like to know

Why these anxious human beings

Rush about and worry so?”

Said the sparrow to the robin,

“Friend, I think that it must be

That they have no Heavenly Father

Such as cares for you and me.”

For further reading: Hebrews 4:16; Ephesians 3:20; Psalm 23; Mark 10:14; James 1:5-7;

3:17-18; Ephesians 2:8-10; Hebrews 13:20-21

## **Eric's Last Wish**

Did you know that, if you smile when you answer the telephone, a caller can sense your response? I was very glad I remembered this when I received a call late one evening not so long ago. Until then, I had not thought to plan for the time when I would be called home, but I have since done so. I'd like to share with you what happened when my telephone rang that day.

"I'm calling to ask if you would be able to attend a musical celebration of Eric's life on Sunday from 6 to 8 p.m. He left explicit instructions that he didn't want either a funeral or a memorial service; instead he gave precise details of the joyful, musical evening by which he wished to be remembered."

I said, of course, I'd be honored to be there.

The celebration was held in the room where Eric had attended choir practice for many years on Sunday afternoons from 4 to 6 p.m. The venue was in a junior high school that formed part of the church where Eric worshipped.

We were greeted cheerfully at the door with a welcoming fruit punch, followed by a sumptuous buffet catered by a local restaurant, well known for its penchant for only the healthiest of foods.

A pastor from the church bid us all welcome, offered a few uplifting reflections of Eric's life and then said grace, after which everyone, in party mood, enjoyed the fare provided; also the upbeat Christian music that was played throughout.

The choir's music director rose to introduce himself, to make some singularly irreverent remarks about Eric's contribution to the choir, and then to introduce members of the choir itself. They then sang two joyful pieces, "Christ is the rock" and "Thy word".

Next some choir members made a few similarly ribald comments about Eric, thus continuing to set the tone for the clearly joyful evening that was to follow.

A wonderfully cheerful member of the choir then gave us a trumpet solo rendition of “Amazing grace”, followed by another solo, this time of “What a friend we have in Jesus” on the harmonica by another member of the choir. The most accomplished pianist who was the accompanist for the choir completed the trio of performances with a virtuoso rendition of “Just a little while to stay here” to a marvelous, hand-clapping, foot-tapping jazz beat.

Some personal comments from faculty and staff members of the graduate Christian university Eric had attended followed next, after which a classmate accompanied himself on the guitar as he sang one of Eric’s own compositions entitled, “Thank you Lord for loving me”.

Not to be outdone, other classmates generated much mirth with their personal comments about the impact Eric had made on their lives, not least when climbing a 30 foot rock face during a leadership challenge weekend.

Two members of the worship team from the church then sang another of Eric’s compositions, this time a superb duet entitled, “I’m on the outside looking in”.

The president and members of the office staff where Eric was working at the time of his demise made cheerful references to their colleague’s great sense of fun, after which the warehouse and production supervisor played a fast Spanish piece which Eric had affectionately called “The beep beep song”. It told the gleeful tale of a young man’s endeavors to persuade a certain young lady to go for a ride in his car despite its appearance of being unable to go anywhere. At the very limited urging of the supervisor

and in accordance with Eric's express wish, all the Spanish production staff danced joyfully to this happiest of songs: some had even dressed in national costume for the purpose and in Eric's honor.

These members of staff next exchanged their own reflections of Eric's life, the supervisor acting as interpreter. It appeared that Eric had studied Spanish, and even taken secret dancing lessons to surprise the ladies at pot luck lunches in the office when he was expected to partake of the Merengue, Cha-Cha-Cha, Salsa and Cumbias. No wonder the office as a whole was known by all who worked there or had dealings with it as "The second happiest place on earth."

The dancing over, the choir's music director handed out sheet music to all present, in English and Spanish, according to choice. He then lined up the choir, positioned the trumpet player, the harmonica player, the pianist and the singers. Finally, he announced that, before the closing prayer, there would be one last piece of music in which everyone, whether they could sing or not, would have to join in: absolutely no exceptions would be allowed. Also, he expected the "joyful noise unto the Lord" to reach beyond the gates of heaven. He then led the entire ensemble in a rousing rendition of "Just a closer walk with thee". Eric could not have helped smiling when he heard it, knowing his last wish had been so joyfully granted.

The musical celebration of Eric's life closed with a prayer offered by a choir member whose prayers Eric had found so uplifting over the years and whose knowledge of the Bible was encyclopedic. Quoting directly from the Bible, the choir member concluded with the words, "The Lord bless you and protect you; the Lord smile on you and be gracious to you; the Lord be favorable to you and give you peace."

On returning home, I reflected on the time I had first met Eric. He had joined us from a temporary agency so I knew nothing about him personally. We greeted each other warmly enough each day and I quickly formed the impression he was a most pleasant, hard working young man. Consequently, I was amazed to be told shortly after his coming on board that he was homeless. A few of my colleagues were taking up a collection to buy him some fresh clothes and asked if I would like to contribute. I said of course I would but surely the greater need was to find him somewhere to stay.

It seemed he had voluntarily left home when he felt there were too many other mouths to feed and too little room in which to do so. Unfortunately, he hadn't bargained on the difficulty of finding work and the high cost of renting even a small room. Eventually, he had been allowed to sleep on the floor of an uncle's house on the understanding he could not be there during the day. I never found out why. I did, however, learn that the floor was so dirty Eric used his only blanket to sleep on rather than as a cover.

The Bible tells us that, if anyone should fall on hard times, we must help them, including having them come and live with us. This is true even if they are a stranger or just a visitor. Furthermore, we must not forget to welcome strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels without knowing it.

The day being Friday, I asked Eric if he would like to come home with me for the weekend while he thought about what he wanted to do long term. I lived too far away for him to stay with me indefinitely because of the difference in our working hours. He said he'd love to be my guest and certainly he proved to be an altogether delightful companion.

I dropped him off at the office on Monday and left promptly for an appointment on the other side of town. On my return I was told he had left at 10 o'clock and would not be coming back. It was thought he had gone to a border town where accommodation was very much cheaper and work that much easier to find.

Not long afterwards it seemed the whole world had heard of the truly heinous crime of which he was charged. I felt no great concern for him, however, for I knew from our brief time together that he would be absolutely certain in the knowledge that the Lord his God would fight for him, as He promised to do. Conducting his own defense most skillfully, Eric was duly acquitted, going on to argue for and receive the largest award for damages in a case for defamation that had ever come before the courts.

He had gone on to live, study and work contentedly enough amongst those of the household of faith, but never felt able to reconnect with anyone from the past, with one exception. During the weekend he had stayed with me, he accompanied me to church. At the end of the service, I noticed a young lady I had not seen before apparently fighting back the tears. I asked if there was anything I could do to help. She said she'd appreciate it if I prayed for her. Motioning Eric to join me I asked if there was anything specific for which she needed prayer. She said well-meaning family and friends were pressuring her to get married and even though the years were passing her by, she had yet to meet the loving, caring, God-fearing, Christ-centered, truly Godly man on whom her heart was set.

After we had prayed together and she had appeared to brighten considerably, having no plans for the rest of the day, I asked her if she would care to join us as I showed Eric the local sights. She said she would like that very much indeed. As the day

progressed, it was truly heartening to see how well she and Eric were getting along together.

I never saw her again after that day, but later I was told they had married. By all accounts their marriage was a happy one, ending together, perhaps fittingly, when the plane in which they were flying went down with the loss of all on board. I could not but recall Ruth's moving words from the Bible: "Do not ask me to leave you, or to return from whence I came: for wherever you go, I will go, and where you live, I will live; wherever you will die, I will die, and there will I be buried. The Lord deal with me and harshly if anything but death part you and I".

For further reading: Numbers 6:24-26; Leviticus 25:35; Hebrews 13:2; Joshua 23:10;

Ruth 1:16-17

## Other Arrangements

My mother once held my brothers and I spellbound as she told us the story of our very first meal together in our own home. An agency worker had asked her what she found the most difficult thing to do in bringing up three small children on her own following the recent, tragic death of her husband. I will let my mother's words take up the story.

“Mending the childrens’ socks at 3 o’ clock in the morning, knowing I have to be up again at 6.”

As the agency worker looked around the sparsely furnished, one room apartment in the poor neighborhood in which we lived, I could see she felt the children were greatly deprived. The fact that the place was spotlessly clean, that the children were well behaved and happy, and that we had even managed to stay together at all, did not seem to register with her.

I had told her of the wonderful neighbors who gladly took it in turns to care for the children while I was at work, but this only appeared to heighten her anxiety. She talked ominously about being forced to make ‘other arrangements’ if the agency thought for a moment there was even the possibility of the children being left alone at any time.

As she prepared to let herself out, she turned around before opening the front door to say that, if ‘other arrangements’ did prove to be necessary, she would do what she could to try and keep the children together. The agency had great resources whereas it was obvious I did not.

Stung by this remark, I replied quietly that I felt us to be truly blessed simply by being able to be together.

“Since when has being blessed put food on the table?” was the swift response.

“Since the time Jesus fed the five thousand after blessing five barley loaves and two small fish”, I replied.

For once the agency worker seemed to be at a loss for words; again that hard, condescending look and she was gone.

I turned to watch the children playing quietly but happily together, a legacy from their adoring father that enabled me to get on with being the wife and mother he knew I loved to be.

The children would soon be hungry, so I went over to the little alcove that served as our kitchen and began to look through the small supply of tins that would comprise our dinner. There did not seem to be quite enough, allowing for breakfast and the children’s lunches as well.

It was then I remembered Jesus saying some things can only be accomplished by fasting and prayer. That was what I would do.

Knowing nothing is impossible with God, even if the situation looked hopeless to me, I went before Him in prayer as usual, asking that He would direct my path out of the extreme poverty into which, through no fault of my own, I had fallen.

The Bible tells us God gives His beloved sleep; how precious, I thought after another night of short but undisturbed rest, to be beloved of God who supplies all our needs from His glorious riches through Christ Jesus.

Thus refreshed, the next morning I resolved to put my situation to the recently appointed general manager of the factory where I worked. It impressed me that, each morning, he would enter the premises, not by the imposing front door to the office

building, but by the unobtrusive door that led to the rear of the warehouse and thence to the production floor where I worked.

He knew every one of us by name, would stop to say “Good morning” to each of us, inquire how we were with genuine sincerity, and tell us always to take good care of ourselves. He would then wish us and our families good health, say “God bless you in the name of Christ”, thank us for everything, and end with the words, “God be with you always”. He seemed to be an altogether godly and caring man.

I decided to take the risk of asking him directly for an appointment to see him when he greeted me later that morning at work. The agency worker had told me she would be gone for three weeks and I felt I had to do everything possible to make a dramatic change in my circumstances before she returned. If I followed the usual chain of command it might take me three weeks just to get to see the general manager.

As I saw him following his customary route up and down the production lines, I couldn't help an occasional fearing of the worst. This I saw as losing my job, but that was to be preferred to losing my children and they perhaps being separated from each other.

In response to the general manager's closing words, I looked at him directly and thanked him for all that he did for us. I then boldly asked if I might make an appointment to see him on an urgent, private matter as soon as he could spare me the half-hour I was allowed for lunch. He gave me his usual warm smile, took out his pocket diary, thought for a moment and then said he would make himself available that very day.

Once inside his office, I told him as briefly as I could about my very straightened circumstances, the veiled threats of the agency worker, and my avowed intent to do all I could to keep our little family together.

He was thoughtful for a while and then said that, after all I had been through, I would know all about crisis management, juggling priorities, making decisions, interacting with many different people, and generally being a solid, all round performer.

“Faith”, he said kindly, “you remind me of the difficulty women have in re-entering the workforce after they’ve been ‘stay-at-home mums.’ That always seemed unfair to me because of all they have to offer.”

Again, that thoughtful pause before he continued, looking directly at me. “How would you feel about moving?” he asked.

“The agency told me I couldn’t even leave my apartment without their permission.”

“I anticipated that; no, I meant moving overseas and starting a whole new life for yourself and your children.”

Seeing my look of bewildered amusement, he went on quickly, “We recently made our first overseas investment. There we could really do with a first-rate supervisor, someone with the very qualities you possess in abundance. You may recall we asked for volunteers but to date no one has come forward.

“As an expatriate from the home office you would have everything provided – furnished accommodation, major contributions to the cost of utilities, school fees and so on – in short, we could not have you in want for anything. Furthermore, career prospects for you would be excellent because the present production manager has already told us he wants to retire in three year’s time. We would take care of everything for you, including the agency worker. Now, there’s your bell for the end of lunch break, so let’s meet again tomorrow and you can tell me what you think.”

I walked home quickly as usual later that afternoon, eager to see the children, the pangs of hunger continuing to gnaw at me. However, the thought of none of us ever being separated or in want again drove me forward.

As I offered my prayer of heartfelt thanksgiving to an ever loving Father that evening, I knew He had made my decision for me. In just three short weeks He would show me the truth of the words in the Bible that eye has not seen, nor ear heard, neither has any mind imagined the things that God has prepared for those who love him.

After announcing my decision at lunch time the following day, I was immediately promoted to supervisor so that I could undergo basic training in my new role before I left. The generous settling-in allowance I was given for use before and after our departure ensured we had everything we needed for the new life we were to lead.

On the day of our departure, the general manager came to see us off. He bought with him four small gifts, “something to read on the plane” was the way he put it, adding he’d like me to open mine while he was there. It was a beautifully illustrated, special edition of the book of Esther from the Bible.

“I know you’ll be familiar with the story, Faith, but I wanted you to know I was as well. You too took a risk in coming to see me after fasting beforehand. You too have been willing to make a big sacrifice in seeking a better life for you and your loved ones. But above all you too have an unshakeable faith in God that has resulted in the triumph of good over evil. You are richly blessed, Faith, and most deservedly so. May God continue to bless you abundantly as only He can in the name of Christ.”

A month’s stay in a hotel was arranged for us overseas while we looked for a place of our own; this we found very quickly.

At the end of our very first day in our new home, I looked around our well-appointed house, the children playing quietly but happily together, and felt I could not be more blessed. But I was wrong.

As I headed towards the spacious kitchen to make dinner for us all, I thought I would first lay the table in the dining-room as beautifully as I knew how in celebration of our first meal together in our very own home. I was putting the finishing touches to my handiwork when there was a knock at the door. Our very first visitor, I thought, as the children gathered around me. It was a special delivery from an obviously fine restaurant. The accompanying, 'Welcome to your new home' card had been signed by the general manager and every member of the production department where I had worked back home. Enclosed was a short newspaper article advising readers that a certain agency worker had been dismissed for what the tribunal stated was 'her hardness of heart'. Across the bottom of the article the general manager had written, 'Shades of Esther again here, Faith'.

I laid the ornate dishes on the dining table and lifted the lid of each one, beginning with the smallest. I paused for a moment before opening the largest, wondering what it would contain. I shouldn't have wondered. There, before the children and I, beautifully presented, were five barley loaves and two small fish.

For further reading: John 6:1-14; Matthew 17:14-21; Luke 1:26-37; Proverbs 3:5-6; Psalm 127:2; Philippians 4:19; 1 Corinthians 2:9-10; Esther 4:11; 4:16; 5:1-2

## **Incident at Falcon Way**

One day, a small child entered my life, changing it forever – and that was before God took him home. I never want to forget the events of our time together, so I decided to record them. What had started out as just another long drive home alone, ended with the pair of us being brought together for all too short a time.

I had stopped the car as quickly as I could, thereby irritating the driver behind me, jumped out, and run towards the woman who was beating a young child with her handbag. I positioned myself between them.

“Let go of the child at once”, I thundered above the noise of the traffic.

The woman staggered back as if she had been struck. The child, until then held firmly by the hand of the woman while trying to shield his head with his other hand, immediately moved behind me, clutching the back of my leg in a vice like grip. He had been crying piteously, “Please don’t hit me, mummy”, with a resignation that spoke of many similar beatings. The woman then tore into me verbally with a string of expletives I will not here repeat.

I called to some bystanders to summon the police who came most promptly. A lone female officer took in the situation at a glance, looked quickly round my leg at the child, and at once began to question the woman. The only coherent response I heard was “My child, my child”. Motioning authoritatively to the woman to remain where she was, the officer then questioned me and a few of the bystanders, taking copious notes as she did so.

The officer next tried to coax the child from out behind my leg but to absolutely no avail. The vice like grip seemed if anything to strengthen, while the cries, although

quieter, continued and were heartrending to hear. The officer called for reinforcements and in short order a second patrol car arrived, followed almost immediately by an ambulance.

The first officer tried to explain to the child that there was nothing more for him to worry about, that he was now completely safe, and would he like to ride in a shiny new ambulance with lights flashing and sirens blazing? This continued for some time but with no result. The vice like grip did not slacken: the crying did not stop. Eventually the officer asked if I would be willing to go with the child in the ambulance along with its crew. I said I would if someone would please follow behind in my car.

A third patrol car was summoned and on its arrival, this time with two officers, the woman was escorted to the police station. The child, still clinging unrelentingly to my leg, and I were driven to a nearby hospital, while my car, with another officer at the wheel, was taken to the same police station.

At the hospital, the little boy would not let go of my leg, although he did allow a doctor to examine his head, albeit only superficially. There did not appear to be any obvious physical injury, but the staff were gravely concerned as to the psychological effects the child had suffered.

In the long wait for a child psychologist to arrive, I asked if I could lie down as my leg was positively throbbing. This was readily agreed to, but still the boy clung to my leg.

Perhaps strange to relate, we both fell asleep, I to be awakened by the child's piercing screams as the nursing staff tried to prize his hands off me. In the end, the child psychologist said it would be for the best if we were both to spend the night in the

hospital, although, given the circumstances, a police appointed nurse would be assigned to us throughout.

When I awoke the boy was sitting contentedly in the crook of my arm, playing with the buttons of his little coat. He allowed the psychologist to examine him and ask innumerable questions, to every one of which the boy would answer in a tone of repeated resignation, "Please don't hit me, mummy". It transpired later these were the only words he knew.

After what seemed a very long time, the psychologist, accompanied by a welfare officer and the first police officer from the previous day, announced it would be in the best interests of the child if we could remain together for the time being. I said I would welcome this, and that is in fact what happened.

The boy's mother was charged with assault and battery, and after previous instances had come to light and been taken into account, her chances of escaping a custodial sentence seemed slim.

One evening, after I had put little George, aged four, to bed, there was a knock on my door. It was the irritated driver and some of the bystanders. They had come to tell me they had devised a get-away plan if, as they suspected would be the case, the mother would merely be given community service and hence the immediate right to have her child restored to her. I could hardly believe what I was hearing but it was obvious my visitors were most serious.

On the day the verdict was to be announced, I was seated in the sheriffs' office below the courtroom in the presence of four highly sympathetic officers whom I had got

to know well in the time since we had first been brought together. George was asleep in his large portable cot that went everywhere with us.

I was told of the procedure whereby an orange light above the interior door leading upstairs to the courtroom would signify the judge's asking the jury if they had reached a verdict. A red light would indicate a guilty verdict and a green one a not guilty verdict.

As soon as the orange light glowed, an officer walked nonchalantly to the exterior door, opened it, nodded to someone outside and secured the door in the open position. We all heard the driver start the engine of the carefully positioned get away car: the air tickets for George and I would be in the glove compartment.

The irritated driver and his cohort of bystanders were right, for almost immediately the light changed from orange to green.

I moved quickly to pick up George but never made it to the door. As I lifted the child in my arms, I knew something was wrong. He seemed so cold, so still, so lifeless, as indeed he was. Somewhere during his afternoon nap, he had entered into his eternal rest.

The autopsy showed serious internal head injuries caused by repeated beatings, but by then the mother had been charged and effectively acquitted and so could not be arraigned for what was subsequently held to be the same crime.

I liked to think God knew what would otherwise be in store for one of his little ones, so He took him home instead. And I could say with Job, "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away: blessed be the name of the Lord."

Another evening, another knock on my door: this time it was George's mother. "I cannot forgive myself for the way I treated my son, my only son: I wondered if you could find it in your heart to forgive me".

In the months since George's passing, I had asked myself many, many times if I could ever really come to terms with the grief that never seemed to leave me. It helped that I had the happiest of memories of our all too short time together, but when George's bedtime came around, it seemed nothing could assuage that grief. We always ended our lovely little routine with animated stories and prayers; now perhaps reaching out to George's mother could help to heal us both.

I told her it was not for me to forgive: only God could truly do that. She replied she knew herself to be completely without hope and asked what she should do. She seemed most genuinely contrite.

I told her as best I could of the biblical story in which the people of Nineveh had likewise been without hope when the prophet Jonah had told them their city would be overthrown in forty days. However, the king had proclaimed a fast, neither food nor water was to be taken by anyone or any creature, all were to wear mourning clothes, to pray fervently to God, and to turn from their wicked ways. Thus might God's anger be appeased and the people live, which is indeed what happened.

I also reminded George's mother of how God had overlooked David's sin in having Uriah killed so that David could have Uriah's widow to wife. Later, I continued, David would say, as can we all, "The Lord is my sure foundation, and my deliverer; in Him will I trust. He watches over me; He is my refuge in times of trouble; He is my savior".

In the light of such inspiring words, I urged George's mother to give her heart wholly to the Lord, to follow His teachings, and to keep His commandments. If she would do this, she could take heart from the experience of Hezekiah who, after being told by the Lord to set his house in order as he was about to die, urged the Lord to remember how he had been faithful before God all the days of his life. God thereupon told the prophet Isaiah to tell Hezekiah that the Lord, the God of David his father, had heard his prayer, had seen his tears, would heal him, and add fifteen more years to his life.

I pointed out to George's mother that, since those far off days, we were no longer without hope because the beloved Lord Jesus Christ had paid for our sins with His life at Calvary. We had only to come to Him with a humble and contrite heart, confess our sins before Him in full assurance of faith and be washed white as snow in the blood of the Lamb.

I think we both benefited from our time together, perhaps George's mother the more so, because nothing has yet taken the place of the loneliness, the emptiness I feel without the little boy. At every turn there is a remembrance of the child who still lives in my heart.

I tell myself over and over again, "Yours, O Lord, is the greatness, and the power, and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty; for all that is in heaven and earth is yours; yours is the whole Kingdom, O Lord, and you are exalted over everything. Both riches and honor come from you, and you reign over all; in your hand is power and might, as well as to make great, and to give strength to everyone. Now, therefore, our God, we thank you and praise your glorious name."

I take consolation as best I can in the certain knowledge that George and I will one day be together again, reading animated stories and saying our prayers at the foot of a cross where another only Son, Himself the victim of such unjust cruelty, died and rose again, that we might have through Him, the gift of everlasting life.

For further reading: Job 1:21; Jonah 3:4-10; II Samuel 11: 12-13; 14-15; II Samuel 22:2-3; Luke 1:69; 1 Kings 8:61; II Kings 20:3-6; I Chronicles 29:12-13

## God's Amazing Grace

A firm believer in the view that the age of chivalry is not yet past, I suppose I shouldn't have continued listening to a conversation that, from where I was standing, I couldn't help overhearing. But something kept me rooted to the spot. As you will hear, I'm very glad it did.

“Look, I know you mean well, but I just won't do it. I will come with you to every lesson so that I can go on helping you practice, but I will not - will not - join the class. I am beyond being the original Plain Jane, no man is going to want to dance with me, and I'm just not going to put myself in the embarrassing position of being a wallflower week after week. Why God made two sisters so different I don't know, but that's the reality of it. I will forever be in your shadow and, as far as I am concerned, that's that.”

“Alright, Helen, I won't ask you again, even if I do think what you say about the way you look is quite wrong. When you smile, you light up the whole room, and I really do appreciate the help you give me when we practice because, whether leading or following, you are so, so helpful.

“But what really worries me, Helen, is when you question why God would or would not do something. We know from the Bible we cannot understand some of the things God does; that His thoughts are not our thoughts, neither are our ways His ways, for as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are His ways higher than our ways, and His thoughts than our thoughts. We also know that God created us in His own image and that when He saw everything that He had made it was very good. So shouldn't we

simply, gratefully and unquestioningly take Him at His word and continue on our way rejoicing?

“I don’t know why, after all God did for them, the Israelites, and especially Aaron, were so quick to make a golden calf to worship when Moses had only been gone for forty days. I don’t know why Samson submitted to the wiles of Delilah after the lesson I would have thought he learnt when his wife had earlier forced him to give her the answer to a riddle. To my simple mind, the Israelites should have been eternally grateful to God for delivering them from the ordeal they suffered at the hands of the Egyptians, while Samson should have remembered that once bitten, twice shy. But those things didn’t happen because God had other plans. Which reminds me, the Bible also tells us that God knows the plans He has for us, plans to prosper us and not to harm us, plans to give us hope and future. Anyway, I have to go now. Thanks again for coming.”

This was the conversation I overheard as we all waited for the dance instructor to start our first lesson. I had joined the class because I was full of admiration for a couple I had often seen dancing so beautifully together on Saturday evenings when I visited a nearby shopping center that featured live music at weekends. I wanted to see if I could learn to dance as well as they did; besides, it looked like a fun and entertaining way to get some exercise.

To say I enjoyed the seven-week class would be a gross understatement: I truly loved every minute of it. While I didn’t exactly have two left feet, I had to practice all the more to keep up with the rest of the class. At the same time, I clearly didn’t have the serious competitiveness of some of the others; thus I felt I was having infinitely more fun

and enjoyment than just about everyone else. But don't get me wrong: I gave of my absolute best.

I went secretly (I hope) to practice dances on the other side of town, even putting together a complete routine of my own that included every move we were taught to help me remember them all. And still my ambitions were no higher than being able to emulate the weekend couple I admired.

As the class progressed, my sense of fun and enjoyment increased in direct proportion to the serious competitiveness of most of the others, especially the men. Perhaps their fear of putting a foot wrong – literally – prevented their doing what it seemed to me their partners liked best. This was being treated like a lady, being made to feel really good about themselves, and sharing if not actually being given the limelight, all while having a wonderful time looking and feeling their absolute best. In consequence I played this card to the hilt until I felt my sense of fun and enjoyment was reciprocated by just about every partner with whom I had the pleasure of dancing.

At the interval in our final class the instructor made a surprise announcement. He told us, as well as those many members of our families and friends we had been allowed to invite to the exhibition we were to give shortly, that some of us had done so well he proposed entering them in a forthcoming competition. In upholding the well-established name of his school, only the best would be chosen and we were not to be disappointed if, this time around, our names were omitted. He then said he would read out the names of the men he had selected in alphabetical order. To my great surprise my name was included.

He then made an even more surprising announcement: the men, as leaders, would be invited to choose their partners. The ladies could decline an invitation and he would have the final say, but since we had all had the opportunity to dance with every member of the class many times over during the past seven weeks, we should be able to choose for ourselves, the partner with whom we felt we had the best chance of winning an important competition. This time the names of the men would be chosen at random by the ladies picking them out of a hat.

The instructor, who was somewhat of a showman in his way, had given these proceedings quite a build up, but now he turned the mounting excitement up a notch, even playing the accompanying music that much louder. With a flourish, he offered the hat to the first lady in line: incredibly the name that was drawn was mine. I don't think even the instructor could have anticipated what happened next.

Playing to the gallery, the ladies squealed with delight, preened themselves coquettishly and generally showed their delight at the prospect of being chosen as a partner by one whose avowed intent was to prove that the age of chivalry was not yet past.

As I approached the line, I bowed towards the first lady, took her hand gently in mine, kissed her hand softly, raised it up, spun her round gracefully, and bowed again. This I did to each lady in turn, but when I got to the end of the line, I kept on going until I was standing directly in front of Helen. She was surrounded by a great many people including, as I found out later, her parents, brothers and sisters. I greeted her exactly as I had done the others, except that, instead of a final bow, I lifted her to her feet and went directly into the routine on which I had practiced long and hard for such a time as this. I

completed the routine three times, all the rehearsing I had done, and the practicing Helen must have done with her sister, paying off to perfection.

With each routine, a new recollection from the scriptures came to mind. The first, seeing Helen's smile lighting up the whole room, was when the Lord said not to look on someone's countenance or their height, because God does not see as we do, for we look on the outward appearance whereas the Lord looks on the heart. The second reminds us there is a time to every purpose, including a time to dance. The third, looking at Helen as the very personification of style and grace, and, yes, unrestrained happiness, was to know that God will not just go on loving her, He will bless and watch over her all her life.

The audience, applauding enthusiastically throughout, leapt to their feet as Helen and I concluded our performance, I with a courtly bow and Helen with the most beautiful curtsy.

As the applause continued to ring out, the instructor came over to us, wagging his finger at us mischievously. "You realize what a spot you've put me in, don't you, and how much hard work we're all going to have to do if you're to have any chance of winning that competition?"

"We just did," replied Helen, smiling broadly and giving my hand a gentle squeeze. It was an unforgettable moment in which she stepped out of the shadow of her sister and into the light of God's amazing grace.

For further reading: Isaiah 40:28; 55:8-9; Genesis 1:27; 1:31; Exodus 32:4; Judges 16:6-21; 14:12-19; Exodus 5: 6-12; Jeremiah 29:11; 1 Samuel 16:7; Ecclesiastes 3:1-4; Deuteronomy 7:13

## The Extent of Your Resources

You will never know the extent of your resources until you are thrust upon them. You should never stop affirming that faith gives you the assurance that what you want to happen will indeed do so, even if you cannot visualize it for yourself. With that in mind, I want to recount to you a shining example of one man's faith that took him on to fame and fortune.

I was once asked, "Do you remember Ian, the young man who used to be our post boy many years ago?"

"The one you fired?" I responded.

"Yes, the one I fired. He's now the highest paid corporate executive in the country. You might want to read this interview he just gave."

I put down my coffee, pushed back my chair and began to read.

Reporter: "What were you doing before you joined your present company?"

Ian: "I was a postboy at a manufacturing plant."

Reporter: "You must have been glad you left?"

Ian: "I didn't leave: I was fired."

Reporter: "May I ask why?"

Ian: "I was accused of leaking confidential company information to a competitor."

Reporter: "And did you?"

Ian: "No."

Reporter: "So what did you do about it?"

Ian: "1 Peter 2:20."

Reporter: "I beg your pardon?"

Ian: "1 Peter 2:20 is a verse from the Bible. 'You get no credit for being patient when you're punished for doing wrong, but if, when you do what's right, and suffer for it, you take it patiently, this is pleasing to God'."

Reporter: "What made you take it patiently?"

Ian: "First, outright amazement, not just at the accusation itself, but also the circumstances in which it was made. Second, the immediacy and power with which 1 Peter 2:20 came into my head."

Reporter: "What were the circumstances?"

Ian: "The chairman called an all staff meeting, itself a first, then publicly announced to all of us that we had just lost the opportunity to bid for our largest contract to date because I had leaked the amount of our bid to our keenest competitor."

Reporter: "What did you do?"

Ian: "Just stood there dumbfounded; then 1 Peter 2:20 came into my head, closely followed by a very vivid recollection of the fact that, when the greatest man who ever lived, the Lord Jesus Christ, stood accused, He answered nothing."

Reporter: "Then what happened?"

Ian: "Two security guards marched me to the postroom, watched while I showed them I had nothing personal there, and then escorted me to the front door."

Reporter: "Didn't you feel like retaliating at all, either then or since?"

Ian: "No; when you know what it is to trust in and obey our beloved Savior, to have complete faith in Him and Him alone as opposed to putting confidence in other people, you want to be as Christlike as is possible for a mortal, sinful person to be. Then

you have no doubt whatsoever as to what is for you personally the only right course of action to take. I never forget God's unfailing love knows no end. His mercies, which are new every morning, keep us safe: great is His faithfulness. The Lord is everything to me, therefore my hope is in Him. He is good to those who wait for Him, to those who seek Him. It is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord."

Reporter: "But didn't the gross injustice of it all get you down – ever?"

Ian: "No; you see I do two things it seems to me very few people do. First, I fast and seek God when I need His help in a big way, knowing He will be intreated of me. Second, not only do I turn negative, disturbing thoughts into positive, uplifting ones, I make those positive thoughts a prayer."

Reporter: "Would you like to elaborate?"

Ian: "Certainly; we all of us have two choices: either we can choose to see the good in something or someone or the bad. For me, there's always the good, although I admit sometimes you have to dig a little to find it. But having found it, I make it a prayer. Read how fervently Nehemiah prayed when told of the affliction of certain Jews, of the wall of Jerusalem being broken down and the gates burned. Don't bemoan your lot, wallow in self-pity or worst of all, blame God for what happened. Instead, thank Him for the very circumstances in which you find yourself, including in advance, the way in which you will benefit in accordance with His perfect will.

"Remember, all scripture is given by inspiration of God. It teaches us the truth and makes us realize what is right and what is wrong. With this kind of attitude we may boldly say, the Lord is my helper: I will not fear what man (or woman) can do to me. You will very quickly develop a most healthy, vibrant and confident outlook on life; indeed it

was the psalmist who said of the Lord, ‘You will show me the path of life: in your presence is fullness of joy; at your right hand there are pleasures for evermore’.”

Reporter: “Is it that attitude that has brought you to where you are today?”

Ian: “Not entirely, but it has unquestionably helped.”

Reporter: “There’s more?”

Ian: “There’s much more. First, there are the examples in the Bible of people who were themselves victims of gross injustice. Joseph, wrongly accused of trying to rape Potiphar’s wife; Naboth, stoned to death because he would not let the king have his vineyard, and, of course, Jesus Christ himself, who gave His life a ransom for many. Second, in my prayers, I like to ask God for guidance, wisdom, knowledge, understanding, largeness of heart and discernment of judgment, not for one moment that I would lean upon my own understanding. “What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and grief to bear; what a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer.” Third, I never forget the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before – and he lost more than you or I ever could – after he prayed for his friends. There are just so many positive, uplifting stories in the Bible, no one, and I mean no one, need ever be downhearted in this life, especially when there is the promise of an even better life to come.”

I could not read further without asking the chairman how he came to fire someone who clearly had so much potential.

“He betrayed us.”

“How can you be so sure of that?”

“Because he was the only one to whom I mentioned our quote. I remember it as clearly as if it was yesterday. I regretted doing so the moment the words were out of my mouth but I just got carried away.”

“Why do you think he betrayed us, as you put it?”

“I don’t know: I just know he did.”

“Well, think about it. Only two types of people would have leaked our quote to the competition: those who wanted to do us harm and those who did not see the contract as being in our best interests. Ian just wasn’t in the picture when it comes to a motive for doing us harm. I recall your telling me yourself he had a great future with us. He had just had a most encouraging annual review, the promise of both promotion and increased pay, and immediate acceptance of some of his very practical suggestions as to how to improve some of the things we did. It’s all coming back to me now. So the long and the short of it is he had nothing whatever to gain from leaking our quote if, as you say, that is what he did.”

“I never mentioned that quote to anyone else so he must have done it. Why, I don’t know. All of this is making me feel very uncomfortable.”

“And so it should. If he had nothing personally to gain from leaking that information, is it just possible he had the vision to see what would happen if he did? That the contract was not in our best interests and that by leaking it to our main competitor, it would bring about their downfall, lead directly to their financial ruin and ultimately bankruptcy, leaving the field wide open for us, from which we have never looked back?”

“Put that way, it would have been strategic thinking at its best but Ian did not have that degree of insight or anything like it.”

“No, but I did. You say you remember mentioning the quote to him as clearly as if it was yesterday. Then perhaps you will recall my stopping by the office to collect appendix B to the contract to read on the plane at the start of my six month overseas trip establishing the international organization into which we have long since grown. I heard your upbeat conversation with Ian, read that appendix, realized from the geologist’s report that the contract was most unlikely to deliver what it promised, that it could in fact bring us to our knees. It was precisely that thought that gave me the idea of leaking our quote to the competition with the results we’ve been applauding ever since. I felt at the time it was one of my better, more farsighted decisions, as indeed it proved to be. But with being away so long, being so busy as we both were, I forgot all about it.”

“If only I had known,” said the chairman at length.

Driving home that night, I marveled at how anyone’s faith could be that strong, how anyone’s trust could be so implicit.

1 Peter 2:20. For a great many years I had tried to right injustices I felt had been done to me, instead of taking them patiently. How different, how very much better things might have been had I done so.

But it is never too late to try, indeed it is incumbent upon us to do that which is pleasing to God. So I took as my inspiration the Song of Solomon which so beautifully and poetically describes love as God intended it to be. Might there one day be an analogy there for me in my very own home? As I pulled into the driveway, I resolved to put into practice the lesson of 1 Peter 2:20.

As I look back over the years that have since passed, at the manifold blessings that flowed from the decision I made that night, I thank God with all my heart for teaching me this arguably most valuable of all lessons. I no longer regret the earlier years, for the subsequent blessings put what preceded them into such wonderful perspective. The most I allow myself to say on occasion is, If only I had known.

If you could benefit from the message of 1 Peter 2:20, remember this: you will never know the extent of your resources until you are thrust upon them.

For further reading: 1 Peter 2:20; Matthew 27:12-14; Psalms 118:8; Lamentations 3:22-26; Ezra 8:23; Nehemiah 1:4-11; 2 Timothy 3:16; Hebrews 13:6; Psalms 16:11; Genesis 39:7-23; 1 Kings 21:1-13; Matthew 20:28; 2 Chronicles 1:10-12; Proverbs 3:5; Job 42:10; The Song of Solomon 1-8

## Old No. 9

I did not have a mentor when I was growing up, or later, but I know of a twelve year old boy who did, and I never tire of hearing the heartwarming story of how Old no. 9, as he was affectionately called, had such an impact on the life of his namesake, Young no. 9.

The boy was no longer called by his real name of Jamie: instead he was simply 'Young no. 9'. People had tried calling him 'Little no. 9' in reference to his size, even just plain 'No. 9', but that didn't work either. So Young no. 9 it was, and his grin from ear to ear whenever someone pronounced it, warmed the hearts of all who heard it.

'Old no.9' had first met him when he called at the hospice to inquire if there were any widows or orphans in residence. Curious to know the reason for the question, Old no. 9 had said quietly, 'Religion that is pure and undefiled before God is this: to care for widows and orphans when they are in need, and to remain uncorrupted by the world'.

The staff immediately recognized that Old no. 9 could bring into a young twelve year old boy's life very much more than he received from the social workers who came to visit him from time to time, as did, on occasion, staff from the orphanage who had first sent him to the hospice.

For the past three months, Old no. 9 had come to the hospice every Sunday afternoon from 4 to 6 o'clock. Young no. 9 lived for those visits. As the bewitching hour of 4 o'clock approached, he would listen with rapt attention for the sound of his visitor's footsteps coming down the hall. Intentionally no one else would make a sound.

Old no. 9 had been the finest sportsman in his field. He had gone from captaining his school, his university and his country, to being voted the nation's outstanding coach

five years in a row. Indeed, it was he himself who had proposed that five consecutive years be the limit for the award to the same coach. No player in any game had ever worn the no. 9 shirt with greater pride or been held in such high esteem for his conduct, both on and off the field. The finest ambassador the game had ever known, it still made sports aficionados wonder how it was that so gentlemanly a soul off the field could become so determined a player on it.

Young no. 9 listened spellbound as his visitor took the boy through his scrapbook. Noting how many times Old no. 9's opponents had been out to 'get him' throughout his career, Young no. 9 would get quite worked up, especially when it appeared his visitor never retaliated. Gently, Old no. 9 would remind the boy that, while it was all right to get angry, it was not all right to do anything wrong; also the Lord had said that vengeance was His. Besides, added Old no. 9, "I can do everything through Christ who gives me all the strength I need".

"Will He strengthen me?" the boy had asked quietly.

"Not only will He, He is able", had been the prompt reply.

Recognizing the determined look on Young no. 9's face, Old no. 9 proceeded to tell the boy the heartwarming story of how Jesus had not only healed Jairus' twelve year old daughter, he had even raised her from the dead. And that after Jesus had been delayed in reaching the young girl by a woman who had been cured of an illness she had had for the past twelve years simply by touching in faith the hem of Jesus' garment.

"Two twelve's and I'm twelve," the boy had exclaimed, "that must mean something because don't they say good things come in threes?"

Old no. 9 had agreed that this was so, recounting as he did so another demonstration of healing spoken of in the Bible, this time by two of Jesus' disciples, Peter and John. A beggar who had been lame from birth had asked the disciples for money. Peter, looking the man squarely in the eye, had replied that he had no money but what he did have he would give to the lame man. Peter had then said to him, "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk", which the man immediately did.

Old no. 9 had then suggested that they pray quietly for a moment about Young no. 9's illness and the demonstrated healing power of Jesus.

"I prayed you'd live for ever," said the boy on seeing his visitor open his eyes. Old no. 9 had gently told Young no. 9 that prayers were a very private and personal way for a person to communicate with God; indeed the Bible admonished us to pray in secret that God might reward us openly. Nevertheless, Old no. 9 had told the boy he didn't mind Young no. 9 knowing that he had prayed that God would give the boy strength to go on living.

After a moment or twos reflection, Young no. 9 had quietly got out of bed, got dressed, packed his few belongings in his small knapsack, and asked Old no. 9 to take him home.

Seeing his visitor's astonishment, Young no. 9 had said, 'Well, you didn't give me any money, so I had to see for myself if you had given me that for which you prayed – strength. I remember your telling me not long ago that when two or three are gathered together in Jesus' name, He will be right there with them; also, that Jesus had more than once said, "Ask in my name and you will receive." Well, Jesus is with us, you asked, I received, so let's go and may God be glorified.'

And so they did, Young no. 9 becoming, as he is today, a walking miracle.

In the years that followed, Young no. 9, never strong enough himself to play sports competitively, nevertheless graduated from Old no. 9's alma mater with a degree in sports journalism. Together they would visit hospices, hospitals, orphanages and insurance companies to seek out widows and orphans in need that they might visit them. It was an especial blessing to come across sports loving children and to bring into their lives, all that Old no. 9 had brought into Young no. 9's. Indeed, it wasn't long before the pair were sponsoring sports matches involving youngsters of both genders: to see their erstwhile grief turned into performances of which their fathers would have been so proud was truly a heartwarming experience.

Separately, and as an intended surprise for Old no. 9, Young no. 9 had been busy applying his growing experience in sports journalism to find out all he possibly could about Old no. 9 with a view to writing a definitive and inspiring biography. Young no. 9 especially wanted to know why it was that so gentlemanly a soul off the field could become so determined a player on it.

Old no. 9 proved to be a very private person indeed. All that Young no. 9 was able to uncover was that, when first asked to play for his country at the youngest age of any player before or since, Old no. 9 had been asked about the unrivalled determination he displayed on the field.

His guarded reply was that things were not well at home but as a youth there was little he could do about it until he became of age. Meanwhile, he would use the playing field as his outlet for the anger he was so well able to control, even channel into superlative performances.

Young no. 9 reflected on the fact that he himself had never had a home, unless a succession of foster homes and orphanages could be so called. But they had taught him of necessity, young though he was, to fend for himself, to strive constantly to improve his lot, and to remain cheerful no matter what the circumstances. This had stood him in good stead when what was thought to be a fatal illness struck and he found himself all but alone in a hospice.

Old no. 9 did not live forever, but Young no. 9 continues today the work they began together, striving assiduously to assuage a youngster's grief, as well as their mother's, through the world of sports, hoping thereby to ensure that all was well in their home.

When he can find the time, Young no. 9 still works on the biography he is writing about Old no. 9, not least because, amongst the papers Old no. 9 left behind, was this anonymous poem:

If I should die and leave you here awhile,  
Be not like others sore, who keep long vigils  
By the silent dust and weep.  
For my sake turn again to life and smile,  
Nerving thy heart and trembling hand to do,  
Something to comfort other hearts than thine.  
Complete these dear unfinished tasks of mine  
And I, perchance may therein comfort you.

Quoting from the Bible, Old no. 9 had once told Young no. 9, that the prayer of a good man is powerful and effective, adding, "I hope you never forget that." Young no. 9 never has, recalling with heartfelt gratitude the day, many years ago now, when Old no. 9 had prayed for strength, Young no. 9 had received it, and God had been glorified through the healing power of His Beloved Son, Jesus Christ.

For further reading: James 1:27; Ephesians 4:26; Romans 12:19-21; Philippians 4:13;  
Mark 5:22-43; Acts 3:1-11; Matthew 6:6; 18:19-20; John 16:24; James 5:16

## **The Sins of the Father**

It is absolutely vital to take what the Bible has to tell us in proper context, and so be able to live our lives joyfully. This was brought home to me very recently, at a wedding of all places, after I had struck up a conversation with a rather tearful young lady.

“Weddings can be very emotional, can’t they? Is there anything a total stranger can do to dry those tears?”

“I vowed I’d never get married, but there’s just so much love inside me, it’s hard, so very hard. I love to dance, have fun and be with a crowd, especially those who are of the household of faith”.

“Well, that certainly needed to come out, didn’t it?”

“Yes, I’m sorry: I shouldn’t have blurted that out to you just like that. I’m sorry, I don’t know what came over me”.

“I think you might have been bottling it up inside you for too long: it had to be brought out. I also think you’ll find you’ll be very glad it did because if a problem shared is a problem solved, I’m sure the same can be said of sorrow”.

After a short pause I asked the young lady if she was going to the reception. She said she had accepted but didn’t feel like going now.

“Well,” I responded, “there’ll be an elaborate table setting waiting for you and people who’d clearly like you to be there. Look,” I went on, “It’s only twenty past four now and the reception’s not ‘til six, so why don’t we find ourselves a cup of coffee, talk some more and then see how you feel”.

Finding a coffee shop reminded me of Somerset Maugham's Albert Edward Foreman and his long search for a tobacco shop. I wondered if our time together would likewise be a life changing experience. And so it proved to be.

Once settled into our booth, Kay, for that was the young lady's name, proceeded to tell me that her father had done something terribly wrong. I did not ask her for details, but the obvious pain on Kay's face told its own story. By way of escape she had joined a Bible study group. It was there she had been told the misdeeds of a father would be visited upon succeeding generations.

Kay proceeded to recount in vivid detail how Josiah, King of Judah, commanded Hilkiah the priest and others to inquire of the Lord for him and others about a book of the law given by Moses. Hilkiah had found the book in the house of the Lord.

After King Josiah had heard the words of the law he was very much disturbed for, he said, the Lord is very angry because our fathers have not kept God's word. Accordingly, Hilkiah and his party went to see Huldah the prophetess who lived in a school in Jerusalem.

She answered them by saying the Lord God of Israel had said to tell the king God will destroy this city and its people; all the curses that are written in the book will come true. This was because the people had forsaken the Lord and worshipped other gods, provoking the Lord to anger and causing Him to pour out His wrath upon the city, a wrath that would not be quenched.

But as for the king, because he had a heart for the Lord, before whom he had humbled himself, God would not bring about the destruction of the city and its people until after the king had died in peace.

It was obvious these events had had a profound effect on Kay. She reasoned the misdeeds of her father, without the saving grace of humility before God, would be visited upon his children or his grandchildren, hence she told herself she would never marry.

I told Kay the Bible tells us the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; additionally, that what the Bible has to tell us must be read in the context of the whole Word of God.

Bringing her down to earth, I pointed out now was as good a time as any to make our way to the reception, there to continue our rather earnest conversation in more convivial surroundings.

Once at the reception, the already bright atmosphere was enlivened by the introduction of the bridal party, the singing of grace, the superb dinner, and the amusing slide show featuring the happy couple that was shown throughout. Next came the speeches, the cutting of the cake, the garter and bouquet toss, the father and daughter and mother and son dance, the bridal couple's first dance, and the money dance. But what was constantly and amusingly diverting was the roving spotlight the DJ would use to draw attention to certain people while gleefully catching others unawares. Here was the dancing, the fun and the "in" crowd Kay had said she liked so much. I set out to try to match the change in Kay's rather somber mood I thought was needed.

I began by asking her if her Bible study group leader had ventured into the New Testament, since the story she had told was from the Old Testament. An emphatic "No" was Kay's immediate response. The leader wanted to make absolutely sure at the outset that his charges were very well aware of the consequences of doing wrong, especially the breaking of the Ten Commandments.

I told her that then I had only good news to give her, starting from this very moment.

Elsewhere in the Old Testament, I continued, it is recorded that the word of the Lord came to the prophet Ezekiel saying, if a father did wrong, he would perish. But if his son did what was lawful and right, he would live. The son would not suffer because of the father and vice versa.

But what was so wonderful was that, if a wicked person would turn over a new leaf, keep all God's commandments, and do that which is lawful and right, they would surely live, they would not die. Everything they had done wrong would be forgotten: what mattered was all the good they did thereafter. The Lord Himself had said, "Have I any pleasure at all that wicked people should die? No: I just want them to mend their ways and live".

I emphasized the Lord's actual words to Kay, not just to edify her, but to show her that there was still hope for her father if we could just help him to see the error of his ways. After all, God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and whoever calls upon His name will be saved.

Imagine, I told Kay, warming to my theme, if we were to plant seeds of goodness in your father's heart, might we not bring about a wonderful transformation in a weak, fallen man and then be able to echo the words spoken to Daniel, "Have no fear; God loves you deeply. Be at peace, have courage and be strong?"

Kay smiled wanly and said she thought her father was beyond redemption because, to her certain knowledge, though hopefully not her mother's, he had broken one of the Ten Commandments in the worst possible way.

I asked Kay as gently but as purposefully as I could if, not having looked at the New Testament in her Bible study, she was nevertheless aware of the story of Jesus and the woman ‘taken in adultery, in the very act.’ She said she wasn’t.

I told her in the simplest terms that some religious leaders, wishing to tempt Jesus, had brought such a woman to Him and asked if, according to the Law of Moses, it wasn’t right to stone her to death. Jesus said to them, “Those of you who have never sinned, throw the first stone”. One by one all the people went away, convicted by their own conscience, until Jesus was left alone with the woman. He then asked her, “Where are your accusers? Has no one condemned you?” “No one, Lord”, she replied. Thereupon Jesus said to her, “Neither do I condemn you: go, and sin no more”.

And this, I reminded Kay, was someone who hadn’t just sinned, but had actually broken one of the Ten Commandments.

It had taken no effort on my part to build excitement into the telling of the story, and it was wonderful to see the look, almost of wonder, that began to light up Kay’s lovely face.

By this time, everyone had been encouraged to take the floor and I knew now was the hour to introduce Kay to the world of which she had said she so much wanted to be a part.

Signally discreetly to the DJ, he swung the roving spotlight directly onto her, announced that the next dance had been specifically requested for her, so would she please lead her party onto the floor. This she did in true regal style, followed by a gloriously free spirited interpretation of the one composition I thought combined dance,

fun and those of the household of faith; it was, of course, the jazz classic, 'When the saints go marching in'.

For further reading: 2 Chronicles 34:14-28; Proverbs 1:7; Exodus 20:1-17; Ezekiel 18:14-21; Acts 2: 21; Joel 2:13 & 32; Nahum 1:3; Hosea 10:12; Daniel 10:19; John 8:1-11

## The Will

Charity begins at home – or does it? Let me tell you why I think it begins with God.

It had taken a long time to complete the first reading of the will. The deceased had been a very wealthy lady with much property and many possessions. There were a large number of bequests and a great many beneficiaries, all of whom were listening attentively in the conference room of a large firm of attorneys.

As the senior partner neared the end of his long recitation, it was probably true to say the will contained few surprises – until the very last page. Here the senior partner stood up and invited everyone to do likewise. He explained these were his instructions, the better to accentuate the gravity of what he now had to say.

A condition was attached to every bequest the deceased had made. It was that all beneficiaries, and everyone else named in the will as receiving nothing, thus preventing them from contesting the will later, take home the package they would be handed on leaving. The package, which would bear their name and for which they would be asked to sign, was not to be opened until the recipient had intentionally set aside time to deal with it. Everyone was then asked to return to the same conference room at the same time ninety days from that day. No questions would be entertained on the subject of the package, or anything pertaining to it. The senior partner concluded his address with the words, “Now, all glory be to God who keeps you from stumbling, and who will bring you in all innocence and great joy into His glorious presence”.

The prevailing mood was one of disappointment that matters had not been concluded that day, there was an assignment to complete, and at least one more meeting

to attend. This was nothing compared to the disappointment most beneficiaries were to experience later.

My recollection was that I entertained no such disappointment. My bequest was very small, consistent with my hardly having known the deceased at all: indeed I recall being surprised I had even been invited to attend the reading of the will in the first place. Also, I was most intrigued to find out what the package contained and what I would be required to do in respect of it.

That evening I opened the package and was surprised to see it contained a beautiful copy of the Holy Bible. A small card was enclosed with my name on it above the following words:

‘God knows all your needs in advance if you will but make Him the center of your world. St. Matthew 6:33. You have until...’ – and here a date was inserted ninety days hence.

Ninety days in which to make God the center of my world? I earnestly hoped I had long since done that. After all, God has told us Himself what is good and what He wants us to do, namely, what is right; to be merciful; to walk with Him in all humility; love our neighbors as ourselves; live quietly, minding our own business, and working with our hands that we might deserve the pay we receive. The deceased had told me herself how much those words meant to her when we worked together in a soup kitchen one Christmas Day. I remember we had a most interesting conversation about which charities those of the household of faith should support.

I also knew from the Word of God that we are to refrain from sinful living; to exercise self-control, and live with devotion to our God and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, if we keep God's commandments, for example, to love one another, and do those things that please Him, we will receive whatever we ask of Him. How often had I been so supremely blessed in precisely this way, additionally in remembering that God is not slow in keeping His promise to return: He's just giving us all more time in which to repent.

As for God knowing all my needs in advance every day, the Bible teaches us not to worry about tomorrow for that day will have worries of its own, just as today will. Indeed, Jesus himself told His disciples not to worry about having enough food, drink or clothing because your Father in heaven knows all your needs already and He will provide for you every day if you will entrust your life to Him, live for Him and make Him the center of your world.

I know I can never repay God for all He does for me, just as I know I can never be worthy of His infinite mercy and lovingkindness towards me. But I badly wanted to be a doer, not just a hearer of His word. This in turn reminded me of another biblical passage, the story of the young man who had asked Jesus what good things must he do to have eternal life. Jesus told him to keep God's commandments, specifically, do not murder, commit adultery, steal, or give false testimony, honor your father and mother, and love your neighbor as yourself. The young man replied that he had done all these things since he was young. He asked what else he needed to do. Jesus told him that, if he wished to be perfect, he must go and sell all he possessed and give the money to the poor; then the young man would have treasures in heaven. After that, he would need to come and follow Jesus. But when the young man heard these words, he went away sorrowing because he had possessions in abundance.

Elsewhere the Bible tells us that rich people should not trust in their money but in the living God who gives us all we need from His own riches. People of wealth should use their money to do good, giving generously to those in need.

I now knew exactly what I wanted to do with my bequest. There is a beautiful passage in the Bible that is often read at weddings reminding us that three things will endure: faith, hope and charity, of which the greatest is charity. If I was to benefit under the deceased's will, I would donate my bequest in full to charity: then could I truly feel I had made God the center of my world.

The conference room where the will had first been read had been completely transformed into a courtroom with a sitting judge of the Supreme Court, in full regalia, presiding. He was flanked by the senior partner of the law firm on one side and the president of an internationally known private detective agency on the other.

Precisely on time and without preamble, the judge began a second reading of the will. At the end of each bequest, first the senior partner and then the private detective would hand the judge a sheet of paper. The judge would immediately confirm, amend or deny the bequest before moving on at once to the next.

The great majority of bequests were reduced, some very substantially, because the beneficiaries had not kept the commandments of God, specifically, they had not loved God with all their heart, with all their soul and with all their might; had not loved their neighbor as themselves; had worshipped other Gods (usually riches and pride) in preference to the Lord, or had made an idol (usually ostentatious possessions) which they served instead. Other judgments included taking the name of the Lord in vain, and failing to keep Sunday as a holy day.

The severest judgments were reserved for, and the bequests wholly denied to, a son who did not honor his father and mother; a cousin who had killed; a son-in-law who had committed adultery; a nephew who stole; an aunt who bore false witness against her neighbor, and the previously mentioned son-in-law who coveted his neighbor's wife.

The residue of the deceased's estate, which by this time was very substantial, was left to 'such charities as Leonard shall direct'. This was the only time my name was mentioned.

Once again, we were invited to collect and sign for a package on our way out. It proved to be a beautifully engraved but empty box. Inside was a card with my name on it above the following words:

'For God will judge everyone's work, good and bad, including every thing done in secret. Ecclesiastes 12:14. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit'.

Although we would now never know for sure, I surmised the deceased knew only too well how very far from making God the center of our world were so many of us beneficiaries. In a true spirit of forgiveness, she had offered us the opportunity of redemption, had given us a most realistic foretaste of judgment day, and left us with a permanent reminder of how empty life is without Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. Conversely, how full life is with Him, for I found quickly enough that the otherwise empty box was actually intended to hold the copy of the Holy Bible we had received earlier.

When I went to the Lord in prayer that night, I thanked Him most earnestly for the deceased's invitation to make God the center of my world. I also thanked Him with equal

fervor for helping me to do so, especially as I dared to think that is where He had been all along.

Can the same be said of you?

For further reading: Jude 24; Matthew 6:33; Micah 6:8; Galatians 5:14; 1 Thessalonians 4:11; 1 Timothy 5:18; Titus 2:12-13; 2 John 5; 1 John 3:22; 2 Peter 3:9; Matthew 6:34, 31-33; James 1:22; Matthew 19:16-22; 1 Timothy 6:17-18; 1 Corinthians 13:1-13; Exodus 20:3-17; Ecclesiastes 12:14; Philemon 25

## **We Always Do**

After Sunday school was over, I noticed a little girl still sitting quietly at her desk. As I walked over to her, she handed me a note. It read: ‘My grandma died last week. Her name was Mildred. Please tell me about heaven’.

I knew the family quite well. They were poor and often in trouble – except for grandma. She was a good Christian woman who had tried to be a strong, godly influence in her granddaughter’s life. Reflecting quickly on what I knew about grandma, particularly how she would so readily help others, even though she herself had so little to give, I sat down beside her granddaughter, took the little girl’s hand gently in mine and told her a story about heaven.

One day, an elderly lady died peacefully in her sleep, stretched out comfortably on her favorite sofa in the living room of her little cottage. When she awoke, she was very surprised to find herself in heaven, to see St. Peter coming excitedly towards her with arms outstretched in welcome, the Pearly Gates swinging open, wide and free behind him.

“Mildred, Mildred, Mildred,” cried St. Peter happily, “we have so looked forward to your coming.”

“But...but...but...what am I doing here?” stammered an overcome Mildred, “I don’t deserve to be here. What have I ever done to merit so great an honor?”

“Mildred, my dear,” said St. Peter quietly, gently placing a comforting hand on her arm, “are you telling me you feel unworthy to be here?”

“Yes, why yes, that’s exactly what I am saying...,” said Mildred, her voice trailing off as the wonder of her new found surroundings began to take hold.

“In which case there’s someone I’d like you to meet,” came the reply, “I think you’ll find He might just change your mind.”

And that is how Mildred came to meet her beloved Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ himself.

“How good it is to see you, Mildred,” said Jesus excitedly, “but I understand you don’t feel worthy enough to be at the gates of heaven?”

Mildred was too overcome to speak.

“So then I’ll just have to take matters into my own hand, won’t I?” responded Jesus authoritatively.

“Mildred, do you remember how I said, “Inasmuch as you have done a kindness unto one of the least of these my brothers, you have done it unto me”? Hasn’t that been the story of your whole, unselfish life? And did I not also say, “In my Father’s house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there you may be also”? I know you recall those words, Mildred, because your devotion to the Word of God was just one of the things I learned to admire about you so deeply on earth.”

Mildred nodded quietly, still too overcome to speak.

“Here’s what I’m going to do,” continued Jesus kindly, “just so you’ll see for yourself how truly worthy you are to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. I’m going to turn out all the lights in heaven. It will be so dark you won’t even be able to see your hand in front of your face. Then I’m going to ask everyone about whom you ever entertained a kind

thought, to whom you ever said a kind word, or for whom you ever performed a kind deed, to light just one, solitary candle. I think you'll be surprised at what you see".

True to His word, as the Savior watched with Mildred and St. Peter, one by one the stars went out and the moon faded from glory. Soon it was so dark you couldn't even see your hand in front of your face.

Suddenly, far, far off in the distance came the light of one, solitary candle, followed by another and another, until, seemingly in no time at all, the heavens were ablaze with the glory of God. Magically, the brightness of the heavens merged into a single, bright, shining star that lingered a precious moment before slowly descending to illuminate a mansion so exquisite Mildred did not have the words to describe it. As she looked closely she noticed the sign above the door emblazoned with the most beautiful flowers she had ever seen. The sign read, 'Welcome home, Mildred. Well done, thou good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Lord.'

"How do you feel now, Mildred?" inquired Jesus gently.

"Humbly grateful," came the quiet reply.

"But you still look slightly puzzled," said our Lord.

"There's just one thing I don't quite understand," replied Mildred. "I was wondering when it was you came and received me unto yourself?"

"Thank you, thank you, thank you, Mildred," exclaimed Jesus, "I was so hoping you would ask me that. Think back if you will to your last day on earth: do you remember the note I left in your mail box saying I would like to drop in and see you if you were going to be home that afternoon?"

“Oh, yes, I remember that very well,” replied Mildred brightly, “who could ever forget so great a blessing?”

“Well, why don’t you tell St. Peter and I in your own words what happened next: we would so love to hear your own account of what occurred.”

“Well,” Mildred began confidently, “I knew I had nothing in the house to offer you, but I thought I could afford to buy a small cake for us to share with our tea. On my way back from the little shop on the corner though, I saw this homeless man feeding the ducks in the park. I thought to myself, if he can share his last morsel with our feathered friends, you would understand if I shared our little cake with the least of one of your brothers. So I did, and we got to chatting. What a wonderful time we had there on that park bench. We had so much in common, and he was such a marvelous conversationalist. Since my husband died five years ago, my life has really been quite lonely, but this homeless young man just made my day. We talked of our mutual love of the English language, English literature, poetry, so many wonderful things. But then, as usual, I began to feel so very tired: I knew I had to go home and lie down. My newfound friend offered to take my arm for which I was so grateful. As I laid down on my favorite sofa in the living room of my little cottage, he said he’d put the kettle on for tea...” Mildred’s voice trailed off at the remembrance of times past.

“I believe there was one particular poem you especially enjoyed sharing together?” inquired Jesus gently.

“Oh, yes”, said Mildred quickly, “and you will know of course that we both knew the words by heart. What a joy it was to recite that poem together, just the two of us.”

“Would you like to recite it to us now, Mildred?” asked Jesus kindly, “St. Peter and I would so like to hear it.”

“I’d love to,” came the enthusiastic reply, “interestingly enough it’s about God, although, being anonymous, I never could find out who wrote it.”

God looked around His garden and saw an empty place;  
He then looked down upon the earth and saw your tired face.  
He put His arms around you and lifted you to rest:  
God’s garden must be beautiful, He only takes the best.  
He knew that you would never, get well on earth again;  
He saw the struggles, the heartaches, the frequent bouts of pain;  
He saw the road was getting rough, the hills so hard to climb;  
‘Twas then He closed your weary eyes and whispered, “Peace be thine.”  
It broke our hearts to lose you, but you didn’t go alone,  
For part of us went with you, the day God called you home.  
If tears could build a stairway and heartaches make a lane,  
We’d walk a path to heaven and bring you home again.

At the end of the quiet stillness that followed, Mildred slowly turned her eyes upon Jesus, looked full in His wonderful face, and the dawn of understanding that suffused her lovely face with a radiant glow touched the Savior’s heart.

“Yes, Mildred,” said Jesus, taking her gently by the hand and leading her into the Kingdom of Heaven, “I was that homeless young man. I did come and receive you unto myself. I kept my promise. You see, my Father and I, we always do.”

For further reading: Matthew 25:31-46; John 14:2-3; Matthew 25:21

## **A Mysterious Letter of Appreciation**

Dear Mr. Neville,

For our assignment this week, you said we could choose any topic or medium we wished. I have chosen to write you a letter of appreciation, and since you also said you liked surprises, I am not going to sign my name, leaving you to guess – at least for a little while - who I am.

My dad had an interesting visitor this week; every Saturday morning at 10 o'clock precisely, this man stops whatever he's doing, wherever he is, and indulges in what he calls 'blue sky thinking'. This is his way of deliberately making time for those things for which he says he would otherwise never have the time. Am I really making any kind of headway in my career? If I changed, what would I rather be doing? What are the three biggest passions in my working life? Where do I see myself in five year's time, three year's time and one year's time? Is what I'm doing now going to get me to where I want to be?

This same man also spends every Sunday evening writing one well thought out letter of appreciation to someone who has helped him in one way or another along life's way. I really liked that idea.

So, last Saturday morning at exactly 10:00 am – as I had been looking forward to doing all week – I stopped what I was doing and the very first thought that came into my head was, 'Be still and know that I am God'. This comforting passage from scripture would not have occurred to me if, in my very first lesson with you in Sunday school, you hadn't told us of Jesus' parable of the sower and the seed; hence this letter of warm appreciation.

I do not have green thumbs but my mum does: the result is we have the most beautiful garden. The soil is so good that, if any seeds fall, they grow thirty, some sixty and some an hundred times more than mum planted in the first place. Unfortunately for my purposes, since I wanted as part of my assignment to emulate the sower, there was no way when mum sowed, that some seeds would fall on the path where the birds would come and eat them. Similarly, we have no rocky ground where seeds have very little soil, so they spring up quickly because the roots have no depth, only to wither away in the hot sun. And we certainly have no thorns into which some seeds might fall and be choked.

A few streets over from where we live is an 'eyesore': that's what mum calls the all but barren desert of a once-upon-a-time-garden. I asked mum and dad if we could go over there and see if the owners would let us sow some seeds on the paths, on the abundance of rocky ground, and amongst the thorns we knew grew there. Ever the friendly neighbor, mum readily agreed, but said she would like first to bake a small cake to take with us.

While she was doing this, dad asked me if I had thought to sow a grain of wheat, a mustard seed and that of a fig tree. I asked him why. He explained that Jesus himself had said that, if a grain of wheat is planted, it will remain just a single grain, but if it dies, it multiplies greatly.

Noting my look of interest, dad said Jesus had spoken another parable to His disciples likening the kingdom of heaven to a man who sowed good seed in his field. However, while everybody slept, someone came and sowed weeds among the wheat, then, when the wheat grew, the weeds appeared as well. The man's workers asked him from where the weeds came, since he had sown only good seed. He replied that an enemy

was behind this. The workers next asked if they should go and gather up the weeds, but the man said, no, because if you do, you are likely to tear up the wheat as well. It is better to let both grow together until harvest time when the reapers can first gather the weeds for burning, and then the wheat for storage.

Jesus also likened the kingdom of heaven to a grain of mustard seed, dad continued, which a man sowed in his field. Such a seed is the smallest of all seeds, but when it is grown, it becomes a tree, large enough for birds to make their nests in it.

As for the fig tree, when its branch is beginning to bud, you know summer is coming. Likewise, when you will see these things, you will know the kingdom of God is not far away.

Before my dad could tell me more, mum came to show us the beautiful cake she had made and which smelt delicious. She said we should take it to our neighbors while it was still warm.

Our knock on the door was answered almost at once by a beautifully dressed, supremely polite little girl who quickly ushered us into the sitting room. There she invited us to sit down and inquired if we would like tea. We declined but in turn asked her if she would like a piece of the cake we had brought. She said she'd be delighted to and would we excuse her for a moment while she fetched a tray. Upon her return, she cut the cake for us all with a most practiced hand, including an extra slice 'for grandpa'. Excusing herself again for a moment, she quickly returned, effortlessly pushing grandpa in a wheelchair. Placing him in front of us, she sat down beside him, took his hand gently in hers and said she would like briefly to explain to grandpa the purpose of our visit, even though we hadn't even mentioned it ourselves.

Using sign language in the palm of her grandfather's hand, she told him how we had come to ask if we might sow some seeds on the paths, on the abundance of rocky ground and amongst the thorns we knew grew here. Grandpa beamed with pleasure, responding by signally that we would also have to find some good ground for the grain of wheat, the mustard seed and that of the fig tree. This last would need to be sited with care to allow it to become a very big tree.

Thoroughly mystified by these events, we allowed the little girl to show us the plots she had picked out for us, adding as she did so, that we were welcome to choose others if we so wished. We saw no need to do so and hence quickly finished sowing the few seeds we had brought with us.

On re-entering the house, our little hostess bade us once more be seated while she explained to grandpa what we had done. She then went on to remind him, even though she told us quietly he really needed no reminding, that the parable of the sower and the seed is this: the seed is the word of God. Those on the path are the hearts of people who have heard the word, then the devil comes and takes it away, so that they may not believe and be saved. The seeds on rocky ground are those people who, when they hear the word, receive it happily, but because their belief has no depth, it eventually ceases to exist. As for the seed that fell among thorns, these are people who hear the word, but as they go through life, they are choked by cares, riches and pleasures, and their belief in God does not mature. (Here I was reminded of how the word of the Lord came by the prophet Haggai saying, "Think about what you have done: you reaped very little although you sowed very much"). And as for the seed that fell on good ground, these are people who, when they hear the word, hold on to it firmly and reap an abundant harvest as a result.

When Jesus' disciples asked Him to explain the parable of the weeds in the field, continued our delightfully learned little hostess, He told them He was the one who sows the good seed. The field is the world, the good seeds are the children of the kingdom of God, and the weeds are the children who belong to Satan. The enemy who sowed the weeds is the devil, the harvest is the end of the world, and the reapers are angels. As the weeds are gathered and burned in the fire, so will it be when the world comes to an end. Jesus will send His angels, and they will gather all evil people out of the kingdom to be thrown into a furnace of fire, where there will be very great consternation. At the same time, all godly people will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.

At this point, I recalled the Bible exhorting us in the words of Amos, who was among the herdsmen of Tekoa, to seek the Lord that we might live; to pursue good and not evil, to hate evil and love that which is good. Again, from the vision of Obadiah, God will soon come to pass judgement on the godless: whatever you have done, it shall be done to you, so on your own head be it.

Looking grave for her tender years, the little girl said, when Jesus commented that, if a grain of wheat is planted, it will remain just a single grain, but if it dies, it will multiply greatly, He was speaking about His death. At that time, He went on to say, He would draw everyone to Him when He is lifted up from the earth. Similarly, His parable of the fig tree was a reference to His coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. Jesus went on to say that anyone who endures to the end would be saved.

“If you bring children up the right way they will not depart from it when they are older,” continued the erudite little girl at her grandfather's bidding. She then went on to say her grandfather, who by this time was winking at us mischievously, wanted us to

know his son felt he was making headway in his career, but that if he were to change, there were other things he would rather be doing. The three biggest passions in his working life were, first, teaching small children about Jesus, for, he said, nothing gave him greater pleasure than to hear that children were walking in the truth. Second, seeing them come to knowledge of Jesus, and, third, creating an environment where this could happen.

In five year's time, he saw himself breaking ground on a huge Bibleland theme park so that the world would be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, in the same way that waters fill the sea. In three year's time he would be congratulating the first graduating class from the children's Bible study ministry he would found, remembering that the Lord has arrived to live among us, that He is an awesome Savior, that He will be so happy for us, He will renew His love for us, and all of us will be singing. In one year's time a ministry would be established under the title, The Seedlings. Finally, the son felt that what he was doing now was going to get him to where he wanted to be. And if this all sounded a trifle ambitious, he would remind himself the Bible instructs us to bring our gifts and offerings to God's house so that there will be food for everyone, whereupon God will open the windows of heaven and pour out so great a blessing, we won't have room enough to contain it.

Seeing our look of growing bewilderment, which by this time took in the events of the whole afternoon, our little hostess announced that the son of whom her grandfather had been speaking was her father. He taught religious education at a local community college, but at weekends he taught at Sunday school. His name was Mr. Neville.

Sincerely in His name,

?

PS I never allow myself to forget it was the Lord Himself who said rain and snow come down from heaven to water the earth, to cause grain to grow, to produce seed for the sower, and bread for the hungry. So it is with His word. He sends it forth, it is always fruitful, accomplishing all He wants it to, bringing prosperity everywhere He sends it.

For further reading: Psalms 46:10; Matthew 13:3-8, 18-23; Mark 4:3-8; Luke 8:5-8, 11-15; Jeremiah 4:3; John 12:24; Matthew 13:24-32; Mark 4:30-32; Luke 13:18-19; Matthew 24:32-33; Mark 13:28-29; Luke 21:29-31, 8:11-15; Mark 4:14-20; Haggai 1:5-6; Matthew 13:36-43; Amos 5:6, 14-15; Obadiah 15; John 12:32; Matthew 24:13; Proverbs 22:6; 3 John 1:4; Habakkuk 2:14; Zephaniah 3:17; Malachi 3:10; Isaiah 55:10-

## The Decision

If you had the opportunity to do a towering amount of good for perhaps millions of people, would you take it? Listen for a moment to what took place at a job interview I attended not so long ago.

“No, thank you”.

“Why – doesn’t the date suit you?”

“No, the date would be fine: it’s just that I don’t think I’d be a good fit for your company”.

“Why ever not? We receive hundreds of job applications all the time. Most people would give their right arm to be a part of our team”.

“But that’s exactly the point: you’re not a team. The body language of everyone in this room, indeed the whole atmosphere, speaks of a virtual dictatorship and not even a benevolent one at that. Unless I’m given the opportunity to change things, and change things fast, your type of company is just not for me”.

“But I said I was open to change, didn’t I?”

“Indeed you did, but the primary reason I’m here is because the company hasn’t changed at all to speak of in the past five years and it badly needs to do so. You may say you’re willing to accept change but I don’t see you doing it through anyone in this room”.

“What makes you say that?”

“The noticeably timid manner in which every member of the board, hardly any of whom spoke at all, gently pushed their pens forward in a neat, straight line to signify their acceptance of my candidature as the company’s – note I didn’t say ‘your’ – managing

director. Where were the thoughtful, searching questions, the penetrating analysis of what I have to offer for such a position? There weren't any".

"Go on".

"You will realize from the most detailed research I've done on your company that I know a very great deal about it. I intentionally set out to find an avowedly Christian organization in your particular field where I felt my qualifications and experience would really add value. Amongst your competitors, your company stood out as having changed the least over the last five years for which your annual report and accounts were available for review. Your reputation is excellent and your earnings record impressive, but your growth is beginning to slow. I wanted to find out why for myself and in so doing, see if there wasn't an opportunity for me to effect change to the mutual benefit of us all".

"And how would you bring about that change?"

"On the principle of 360 degree feedback, I would start by inviting every single person in the company to write me a memo, as short or as long as they wished, under the heading, 'If I were the newly appointed managing director of this company, this is what I would do'. I would ask for a response within six days because I think having a deadline concentrates the mind wonderfully".

"I'll agree to that: I'll issue a memo to the staff right away".

"No, sir - you're missing the point. I'll issue the memo, only it won't be a memo: it'll be an invitation, and it'll be to 'all our people', not 'the staff'. Responses will come direct to me; I'll review and prioritize them and give you my recommendations. If you accept them, and give me the necessary authority to implement them, I'll count it a privilege to join the company; if not, I won't".

“I’ll agree to that”.

“Thank you, but you’re only one member of the board, albeit the president of the company. If you want to start as you mean to continue, you’ll put my idea to the board in a secret ballot which I will conduct here and now and abide by their decision. Thus will you have given us a prompt and practical demonstration of your genuine willingness to accept change”.

“I’ll agree to that”.

The board voted unanimously for the invitation to go out to everyone in the company and by the end of the week I had over a thousand replies. It was a Herculean task to go through each one, but to be fair, there was a very great similarity between them all, so, to begin with, prioritizing them and coming up with recommendations was neither particularly difficult nor time-consuming. Once and once only was my attention drawn to a particular response to my invitation: someone called Ophelia had signed it and this is what it said:

If I were the newly appointed managing director of this company I would adopt the following as:

My Bill of Rights

with acknowledgements to the Holy Word of God

The very best thing anyone can do is be happy in their work; to achieve this I’m going to ask God to ensure whatever I say and whatever I think is pleasing to Him.

I will start my work by keeping still and telling myself that God is in control. If I feel overwhelmed, I will remind myself that Jesus invited me to come to Him if I felt I had too much to do and He would give me rest.

I will not allow myself to forget it was God Himself who said He would teach me and guide me, would give me advice and watch over me. I have only to commit my work to Him for my plans to be established and for Him to show me what to do if I would but trust in Him with all my heart and not rely on my own insight.

I will acknowledge God's presence, do the very best work I can, and allow Him to transform me into a new person by changing the way I think. Thus will I know what His plans are for me and how good, pleasing and perfect is His will.

I will be eager to present myself to God in the very best light, not to be a disappointment to Him in any way, and to deal only in the truth.

I will at all times be strong and very courageous, never allowing myself to be frightened or dismayed, albeit operating at all times within the law and the dictates of honorable society. Everything I do will be for the glory of God alone, while all my endeavors will be proper and in order, for I know full well that all things work together for good for those who love God.

I will wait for the Lord and keep to His way, remembering that all things are possible with Him. I will seek, knowing that I will find; also that those who seek the Lord will lack nothing of value, since God does not withhold anything from those who walk in righteousness. If I lack wisdom, I will ask God for it, firmly believing He is near to all who call on Him in truth, for He is worthy to be praised.

I will continue to ask God to lead me and guide me for His name's sake; to make His ways known to me; to show me the paths He would have me follow, and to lead me in the truth, that I may walk in it unwaveringly.

I will ask God to teach me to do His will for He is my God, and to let His good spirit lead me in the straight and narrow way. Specifically, I will ask God to teach me the way of His commandments, and these I will observe in all that I think and do and say.

I will ask God for understanding that I may adhere to His law with my whole heart.

I will ask God to search me; to know my heart; to put me to the test; know my thoughts, and allow integrity and right living to uphold me, for I wait for God alone.

I will tell myself that it is God who gives me strength, who keeps me from harm, and who will be with me always, even to the end of the world.

Ophelia was in charge of special projects, which I knew from my review of the company's report and accounts had been the biggest revenue earner during the past five years. I had wanted to meet her on that count alone, but now I had another, even more compelling reason to do so. She turned out to be one of the most God-fearing people I had ever met, especially in the secular world.

She began by telling me that Nehemiah was one of her truly great heroes of the Bible on account of the superb leadership he must have displayed in overseeing the rebuilding of the wall of Jerusalem. This was achieved in just fifty-two days after the wall had been broken down and its gates destroyed by fire over one hundred years earlier. A total of thirty-nine teams had done the actual rebuilding work, from Eliashib to the

goldsmiths and merchants, suggesting that Nehemiah was superb at delegation. This was something we all needed to be, said Ophelia, if we were to complete major projects on time, within budget and within scope.

Perhaps, she continued, Nehemiah had got his inspiration from Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian. Seeing the magnitude of the task that confronted Moses in judging the people of Israel from morning to evening, his father-in-law had suggested to Moses that he look for able, God-fearing, and trustworthy men, those who spurn corruption, and appoint them as judges over the people. Such men could bring the important cases to Moses, but decide the minor ones themselves. Thus would a major burden be lifted from Moses and the people would go home peacefully, knowing they had had a good hearing.

Nehemiah was a wonderfully upright man, continued Ophelia warmly. He would not allow himself to be distracted from 'doing a great work', and when urged to take refuge in the temple because some evil people sought to take his life, he replied, "Should a man like me run away? I will not go in. Would a man like me go into the temple to save his life?"

"The Bible does not tell us how Nehemiah set about deciding what needed to be done and how, but speaking for myself", Ophelia went on, "I like to begin by inviting as many interested parties as possible to a brainstorming session at which we seek to answer these four questions:

"What is the problem?"

"What are the possible causes of the problem?"

"What are the possible solutions to the problem?"

“What is the best solution?”

“These sessions usually end up being highly charged affairs as ideas are thrown out at will. I tell attendees in advance there is no such thing as a dumb question and no discussion or debate will be entertained on any ideas presented, all of which are noted at breakneck speed on flip charts. The result is a free flow of ideas in rapid succession that builds excitement, innovative thinking and, as often as not, really practical suggestions on how to proceed.

“But as the facilitator of these sessions, I’m looking for more than this. What I’m really seeking to identify are three wise men – or women – preferably with a genuine desire or interest in making the project a success. In all my years of experience, it is wisdom beyond all other considerations that brings success to a project - not experience, not position, not length of service, or anything else.

“Why three wise men or women? Well, again, there’s the Biblical precedent of the three wise man who brought gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to the infant Jesus, gifts that were rare, precious and expensive. Three is also the minimum number needed for a clear decision, outside of a dictatorship which, in my view, is no way to manage a project. More than three can be counterproductive for a number of reasons”.

With time for one more question before I had to leave, I asked Ophelia which was her most successful project. She thought for a while and then said, “The one that was also my biggest failure”.

She went on to explain that, a few months ago, she had been asked to take on a project in an overseas country that was economically deprived, was enduring civil strife, and suffering from a medical epidemic. There were no internal resources to manage the

project, but born of earnest prayer and fasting, just as Nehemiah had done, came the idea to think, not about the three wisest people she knew, but, fascinatingly, the three wisest people she didn't know. She immediately thought of luminaries who had won the Nobel Prize for economics, peace and medicine respectively.

With her usual determination, Ophelia set about finding three such 'wisest of the wise' as she called them; before long she had found them, interested them most keenly in the project and, subject, as always, to the approval of the president of the company, secured their willingness to be part of the project team. Sadly, the president hadn't approved – said it would be too high a profile for the company to adopt.

“For the first time since being put in charge of special projects, I felt dismayed”, said Ophelia. “The towering amount of good we could have done for perhaps millions of people in that country was not to be underestimated, especially when I had such a brilliant team ready to take the helm”. Quoting scripture, Ophelia added, “This is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us, and sent His Son to take our sins upon Himself. Beloved, if God loved us all that much, we ought also to love one another”.

So saying, Ophelia was quietly wistful for a time, which gave me an idea. I asked if I might read a copy of her report. She agreed readily enough, and in parting said, again from scripture, “Grace, mercy and peace be with you from God the Father and from his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, in truth and love”.

Ophelia's report was brilliant as I knew it would be: at the same time it put me on the horns of a dilemma.

By now I had every confidence I could bring about the changes in the company I felt were greatly needed; in a word, replacing authoritarian rule with corporate

democracy, thus building on the talents of the people as opposed to stifling them. I saw the opportunity as a secure, high profile position that would cement the future of the organization and the jobs of the thousand or so people who worked for it. It promised to be a most satisfying appointment: indeed the very one for which I had applied.

At the same time, if I were to invite Ophelia and the three Nobel laureates to join me in an entirely new enterprise, this being the idea that had occurred to me earlier, the future would be most uncertain. However, we stood to do – how had Ophelia put it? – “a towering amount of good for perhaps millions of people”.

I contrasted my dilemma with two sayings of Jesus in the Bible. Our Savior’s parable of the talents ends with the words, “To those who have much, even more will be given and they will be most richly blessed”. On another occasion, Lord Jesus had said to His disciples simply but with such feeling, “Feed my sheep”.

It was by no means easy deciding which course of action to take: join the company, or start an entirely new enterprise. And yet it was a decision I was expected to make, along with my recommendations, at nine o’ clock the following morning.

I entered the boardroom at the appointed hour. What decision do you think I made? What would yours have been?

For further reading: Ecclesiastes 3:22; Psalms 19:14, 46:10; Matthew 11:28; Psalms 32:8; Proverbs 16:3, 3:5-6, 37:3; Romans 12:2; 2 Timothy 2:15; Joshua 1:9; 1 Peter 2:13; 1 Corinthians 10:31; Colossians 3:23; 1 Corinthians 14:48; Romans 8:28; Psalms 32:34, 27:14; Mark 10:27; Matthew 7:7; Psalms 34:10, 84:11; Luke 11:9; James 1:5; Psalms

145:18, 18:3, 31:3, 25:4, 25:5, 86:11, 27:11, 143:10, 119:33-35, 139:23, 25:21, 18:32;

Nehemiah 6:15, 1:3, 3; Exodus 18:13; Matthew 25:14-30; John 21:17

## Joy That Knows No Bounds

Do you know what it is to be afraid of something or someone? To wish there could be some good news for a change? Never to experience real joy? Not to be able to live life to the full? I knew someone once to whom these circumstances applied. Perhaps you might find it helpful to hear what I told them.

‘The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation’. So wrote Henry Thoreau.

“But it doesn’t have to be that way, Paul, no matter how dire your circumstances. Consider for a moment just these two sentences taken from the Bible: “Don’t be frightened; I am the bearer of wonderful news that will bring great joy to everyone. This very night in the city of David, a Savior has been born who is Christ the Lord”.

“Before we’re through, Paul, I want to show you that, just by concentrating on these few words, let alone every word of God, you can leave behind your life of quiet desperation for all time to come. By the way, I could have chosen many other passages from the Bible, but I selected this one, not just because of what it has to say to us directly, but because it speaks of birth, of a new beginning if you will, which is what I hope to give you today. Remember, Paul, today is the first day of the rest of your life and I mean to make it count, to make it memorable.

“Let’s now look more closely at some of the most encouraging words in these two uplifting sentences. And let us do so slowly and carefully, savoring each one, that its real meaning, its true significance, may lead to a life-changing experience for you.

“ ‘Don’t be frightened’: wouldn’t it be wonderful never to be afraid again? But people don’t say these words to you, even those who know the extent of the trials you are

going through, do they? The most they might say is, “Don’t worry”, but that’s much easier said than done, isn’t it?

“And yet Jesus himself said, “Don’t be troubled, and do not be afraid. Everything will be all right. It is I: do not be frightened. Have no fear. I am with you. Do not get upset for I am your God. I will give you all the strength and help you need. I will support you with my strong right arm”.

“Elsewhere the Bible admonishes us, “Be strong, and courageous, all you who wait on the Lord. Fear no one, for God it is who goes with you; He will not leave you or forsake you. For He gave us a Spirit of power, of love and of self-control, not of fear and timidity”.

“With these stirring words ringing in your ears, Paul, your fears should be fast disappearing, so what if we replaced them with some really good news? Isn’t it true there’s so little of this about today, no matter which media you choose? But if you were living in desperate times, wouldn’t it be wonderful if someone actually gave you something to feel good about?

“The Bible states, ‘Good news from far away is like cold water to someone who is thirsty’. Here the Good News is about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God who came as a man, born into the royal family line of King David. God had promised this Good News a long time ago through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures. And when Jesus did come, people listened intently to what He had to say because He performed many miracles, including healing a number of people who were paralyzed or otherwise infirm. This brought great joy to everyone.

“Reading from a scroll containing the messages of Isaiah the prophet, Jesus Himself said, “God’s Spirit has come to me, for He has instructed me to preach the Good News to the poor. He has sent me to announce that prisoners will be set free, blind people will see, those who are oppressed will be freed from their tyranny, and the time of God’s favor has arrived”.

“Is that not the most wonderful news, Paul? And as if that weren’t enough, how would you like to experience, not just joy, but ‘great joy’?

“Listen for a moment again to Jesus: “You haven’t asked for anything in my name up to now. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will know no bounds”.

“Referring to Jesus, the Bible records, ‘You love Him though you have never seen Him, and though you don’t see Him now, you believe in Him and experience a joy so heartfelt you can’t even begin to express it, for you are receiving your reward, your soul’s salvation’.

“In times of trial, the Bible reminds us, ‘They will return to Jerusalem singing with everlasting joy; they will be overcome with gladness and joy, and all their sorrow and grief will be gone. Consider it pure joy, whenever you face trials of any kind, because with the testing of your faith comes perseverance. And as perseverance grows, you will develop a strong character, equipping you for any eventuality. I have great confidence in you; you make me very proud. I am greatly encouraged because you bring me joy. You may cry all night; but joy will come in the morning. Those who sow tearfully will reap joyfully. It is good to enjoy your work and be content with your lot in life – this is a gift from God. Those who have this experience seldom look back in sadness, for God has given them reasons to be joyful’.

“Paul, by now your fear has gone, you’re receiving unparalleled good news, and you are experiencing great joy, a joy that knows no bounds; but ‘you’ doesn’t just mean you alone, Paul, – it embraces everyone – you, me, everyone – no one, but no one is excluded. So don’t think your circumstances, or those of anyone else, no matter how desperate they may seem to be, will put you or anyone else beyond God’s power and desire to help.

“In his letter to the Romans, Paul the apostle posed - and answered – these questions: “Is there anything that can separate us from Christ’s love? Whatever may befall us – catastrophe, persecution, hunger, destitution, danger or even the threat of death - does it mean Christ doesn’t love us anymore? No, absolutely not: inspite of all these things, we are victorious through Christ and His love for us, from which nothing, absolutely nothing, can ever separate us”.

“Who then exactly is ‘our Savior who is Christ the Lord’? Here’s just one answer the Bible has to give us amongst countless others, all of them wonderfully reassuring: ‘When people call out to God in time of need, He will send a Savior to them who will meet that need’.

“That, then, is the message I wanted most earnestly to impart to you, Paul, and for you to share with anyone you might meet whose life is one of quiet desperation. In a word, I want you to have four blessings you never appreciated you had before but which will now be with you from this day forth: freedom from fear, good news, great joy, and a Savior who is Christ the Lord.

“I began with the words of Henry Thoreau: let me end with those of Jesus Christ: “I came that they might live an abundant life. I tell you this so that you may be filled to overflowing with my joy, now and forever” ”.

For further reading: John 14:1, 27; Matthew 14:27; Isaiah 41:10-13, 43:5, 44:8; Psalms 31:24; Matthew 17:7; Mark 5:36; Deuteronomy 31:6-8; Psalms 27:14; 2 Timothy 1:7; Proverbs 25:25; Mark 1:1; Acts 8:4-8; Romans 1:2-3; Luke 4:17-19; Isaiah 61:1-2; John 16:24; 1 Peter 1:8; Isaiah 35:10, 51:11; James 1:2-4; 2 Corinthians 7:4; Psalms 30:5, 126:5-6; Ecclesiastes 5:19-20; Romans 8:35-39; Psalms 17:7; Isaiah 19:20, 43:11, 45:21, 63:8; Luke 1:46-55; 1 Timothy 2:3-4, 4:10; Titus 3:4-5; Jude 1:24-25; John 10:10, 15:11

## The Shoe Shine Boy

“Estimated waiting time five years? Five years to get a hotel room?”

“That’s right”, confirmed the clerk at the airport information desk. “It would seem you haven’t heard of that particular hotel, but that’s the way it is. I put my name down four years ago so I’m on my last lap – only one more year to go”.

“But what’s so special about it?”

“Why don’t you go and see for yourself while you’re here; meanwhile, let’s find you something else right away”.

The hotel in question looked thoroughly dilapidated from the outside, in keeping with the rather run down neighborhood in which I eventually found it. Nothing daunted, I entered the lobby, made for the only desk, and inquired about a room. The clerk mentioned a date five years hence, adding they’d yet to have a cancellation in the fifteen years they’d been open, but if I’d like to be no. 69 on the waiting list, I had only to ask. I had already made up mind to take the first available date on which I could secure five confirmed reservations for the small alumni group I planned to surprise.

“I’m sorry”, came the reply, “but we only accept reservations in person: it’s our way of ensuring we know well in advance who to expect and when”.

“But why is that so important?”

“Because that way we can extend to you a truly personal welcome. I grant you that may seem unusual but then we are not your average hotel”.

“Well, then, can I at least see a room? I’m afraid I’ve not been too impressed with what I’ve seen so far”.

“I’m sorry again, but they’ve all been taken and we make it a point never to disturb our guests”.

“How long can I stay if I make a reservation?”

“Just the one night: we don’t take reservations for longer”.

“How ever do you get people to stay here under these conditions?”

“Oh, there’s never any shortage of people wanting to stay here – never has been and doubt there ever will be”.

“Alright, then: how much does a room cost for just one night?”

“There’s no charge – everything’s been paid for already”.

“By whom?”

“You’ll find that out when you come”.

I left the thoroughly unprepossessing looking but intriguing hotel determined to get my alumni group to come along and register. I wanted to do something really different when my turn came around to organize our annual get together, and the mystery surrounding the hotel suggested to me it could be just the sort of unusual venue I was seeking.

Well, the group did come and register and the five-year wait did not seem all that long. Came the day, the five of us trooped in, signed the register, and were escorted upstairs. What a surprise awaited us.

Our individual suites – not merely rooms – were the most sumptuous we had ever seen anywhere, the more so given the run down look of the hotel from the outside and the surroundings in which it was located.

Standing just inside each suite was a uniformed member of the hotel staff who quickly told us it was their duty to see to our every need during our stay: all we had to do was ask.

One of the many services the hotel had to offer, one that struck me personally as particularly unusual, was a complimentary shoeshine. As our hostess explained, we could hand our shoes to her, leave them outside the door, visit the shoeshine boy near the lobby, or make an appointment to meet him any time of the day or night. I'd never had my shoes shined before, and given the lengths to which the hotel seemed to go in order to provide the service, I thought I'd take advantage of it.

My shoes were returned within the hour with the following short note inside them:

*Dear Querida – I'm sorry to hear you carry so much guilt around with you, for this results in your hiding from God who can remove all guilt, as can His beloved Son, Jesus Christ.*

*Read how God provided atonement for the real guilt of Adam and Eve, or how Nathan confronted David with his sins, paving the way for his repentance and confession. Contrast this with Esau who found no place for repentance. Take heart from knowing that if you confess and turn your back on sin, you will have mercy and peace.*

*Claim with confidence the truth that Jesus Christ removes all our sins and sets us free. Pray for a clear conscience with your sins blotted out, knowing there is no condemnation if you are in Christ Jesus. Finally, forget the past, look to the future and strive to win the prize for which God is calling you because of all His beloved Son, Jesus Christ, did for you.*

*In His name,*

*The Shoe Shine Boy*

*PS Love your name – hadn't come across it before so looked it up – see it means 'beloved' in Spanish.*

I was stunned. How could a total stranger know of the agony I suffered from the guilt I carried with me and had done these so many years?

Noticing my incredulous reaction, the angel (as I now call her), who had been standing by the door when I first arrived, walked quickly but quietly to the table beside my bed, and picked up the copy of the Bible that was there. Opening it at the bookmark she showed me the words, "Please come quickly, Lord, and rescue me".

After we had said these words together, I immediately felt as if a great weight had been lifted off my shoulders. I wanted to shout for joy. I knew I radiated my newfound sense of liberation and was anxious to tell my alumni friends what had brought it about.

When I joined them for dinner, they were surprised and delighted to hear what I had to say; they were also intrigued to learn what the little note inside their own shoes would tell them.

During a suitably lighthearted and quite superb dinner in a dining-room that matched our private suites for opulence, we had an engaging conversation trying to forecast what the shoeshine boy would tell each of us in turn. With almost indecent haste, we drank our coffees and all but ran to our suites to ask for our shoes to be shined, only to find that three of the other four had already been so.

As we gathered together in my suite, the first note we read carried the following words:

*Learn not to let stress cause you to worry. Pray to God at such times for He cares about our stress. He is always with us, so wait upon Him and let Him be your refuge when stress, which delegating can alleviate, comes to call. Hand all your worries and cares to God, for He only wants what's best for you. Have hope in God, don't be anxious about anything. Tell God your needs and thank Him for taking care of them. Put God first in your life and do not worry about tomorrow for tomorrow will take care of itself. If you do these things, you will find a peace that we humans cannot understand, while your heart and your thoughts will be at rest as you trust in Christ Jesus.*

*In His name,*

*The Shoe Shine Boy*

With equally uncanny perception, the second note we read said:

*Be comforted in the knowledge that all grief will end. Friends are there to comfort each other, so make the most of your time together.*

*Though God does not prevent grief coming into our lives, He shows compassion at the same time: so great is His unfailing love. For He does not willingly bring affliction or grief to anyone; instead He sees our earthly life as preparation for the greater joys of heaven.*

*God's only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, was a man of sorrows and familiar with grief, even weeping at the grave of Lazarus. Moreover, Jesus said, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." It is never easy losing a loved one, but I*

*hope it will be a consolation to you to know that, through His own death and resurrection, Christ defeated sin and death, so that to believe in Him now means:*

*We shall never die; we have everlasting life; we have a place assured in heaven, and we shall take part in the bodily resurrection. After all, it was Jesus Himself who said, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though they die like ordinary people, yet will they live once more. And whoever lives and believes in me will gain eternal life and never pass away".*

*So, join with me in saying, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who of His abundant mercy has given us the privilege of life anew. The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead enables us to live with high expectations, for God has kept a priceless inheritance for us, pure and undefiled, which nothing can ever change for the worse. And, because we trust in Him, Almighty God will protect His children unto salvation to be revealed on the last day".*

*Finally, always remember when your loved one comes to mind, that, in the fullness of time, God will take away everyone's sorrow, while all death, sadness, crying and pain will be no more, for the past will be gone forever.*

*In His name,*

*The Shoe Shine Boy*

The third note was just as apt, if a little more restrained.

*People, including you, should always be ready to listen, but slow to respond and to become angry, for anger prevents you leading the good life God wants you to have. So do not give way to anger any more, or to wrath, malice, blasphemy and bad language. Remember, it is the fool who gives vent to his anger, while a wise person is*

*self-controlled. Also, it is the gentle answer that causes anger to diminish, but a word spoken harshly causes anger.*

*I urge you to leave your old self behind because it is being corrupted by its impure desires. Instead, adorn the mantle of a new self, created to be righteous and holy like God. Thus will your attitude of mind be renewed, as you live by the Spirit, no longer satisfying the desires of your sinful nature, but letting Christ's word permeate your whole being as you teach and admonish one another wisely. The result will be a clear conscience in the sight of God and all people.*

*In His name,*

*The Shoe Shine Boy*

At the end of reading these three notes, our ministering angel showed each of us in turn the words in the Bible, "Please come quickly, Lord, and rescue me", which we repeated eagerly out loud. Once again, 'fullness of joy' enveloped all four of us. But where was the fifth and final note? The shoes in question had been duly returned immaculately clean but there was no note inside them.

"Wait on God, take courage and He will give you strength, only wait on the Lord". This was the passage in the Bible our chosen angel read to us. Why, we wanted to know, but she only smiled in reply, even though we reminded her she herself had said it was her duty to see to our every need during our stay. All we could do was ask, but still she only smiled.

As it was beginning to get late, we decided to make an appointment with the shoe shine boy the following morning before checking out after breakfast. By now we

weren't just intrigued enough to meet him because of what he had written so perceptively and helpfully to four of us, we had to know why there was no fifth note.

After a blissful night's sleep in the very lap of luxury and to the accompaniment of beautiful music in which someone clearly knew our individual tastes very well indeed, we met for breakfast as planned. It was truly a meal to set before the proverbial king.

The Shoe Shine Boy proved in fact to be a man of mature years, great eloquence, an incisive knowledge of the Bible, and a delightful sense of humor. He knew at once who we were, and as if to take the wind out of our sails, handed the fifth member of our group a note which read as follows:

*I kept this note from you until now so that you could experience your lack of patience for the last time. From this moment on, I want you to look at the causes of your impatience in an entirely different light. I'm asking you to be joyful in times of trial, knowing that this testing of your faith will produce patience. By letting patience take firm hold of you, you will have a sense of well being and fulfillment such as you never had before: indeed, you will quickly learn to be content whatever your circumstances.*

*If you will take this positive approach when adversity strikes, you will learn the meaning of perseverance, of developing a strong character, of knowing what it is to be hopeful in a way that will never cause you to be disappointed.*

*Practice being patient with everybody, specifically ensuring that everyone realizes two wrongs do not make a right. Strive at all times to do what is right yourself, not just for your own good but for that of everyone else. Also, don't get worked up if you*

*seem to miss out while good things are happening to people you don't feel to be deserving of them.*

*It is a sin to be impatient and for this you must ask God for His forgiveness. Then, leave the matter in His hands and wait patiently for Him, obediently directing all your thoughts to His beloved Son, Jesus Christ. After all, you were crucified with Christ, hence it isn't you who lives any more but Christ who lives within you. Whereas you previously lived for yourself, now you live by faith in Jesus Christ who loves you and who gave Himself for you. Having thus been raised with Jesus, set your heart on heavenly things, especially the fruit of the Spirit which, along with patience, includes love, joy, peace, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, self-control, faith, meekness, longsuffering and temperance.*

*And speaking of love, remember how patient it is; it does not give way to envy, boasting or pride. It is polite, not self-seeking or easily angered, and does not keep a tally of things that went wrong.*

*Try your best to put into practice the things I have written to you about, seeing them as promises for a better life. Thus will your faith lead you to a life of high moral value, to a deeper knowledge of God, and to the exercise of self-control. This in turn will lead you to patient endurance, to godliness, to love of those of the household of faith, and thence to real love for all people.*

*Be patient then up to the time of the Lord's coming. Just as the farmer waits patiently for the crops to grow and the rain to come, you too must be patient, standing firm, for the Lord will soon come.*

*In His name,*

### *The Shoe Shine Boy*

Turning the open Bible round that lay in front of him so that we could all read it, The Shoe Shine Boy pointed to the words, “Please come quickly, Lord, and rescue me”. He invited us to read them aloud, which we did. Once again, there was that glorious feeling of a heavy burden being lifted off our shoulders as our whole beings were enveloped in pure joy.

After allowing us to savor the moment, The Shoe Shine Boy went on to explain that an estimated waiting time of five years to obtain a reservation at the hotel was to remind us that it took a long time for the chosen people of God to enter the promised land. This they did after many years spent in the wilderness, hence the hotel’s symbolic appearance of being in a dilapidated state in a rather run down neighborhood. That there were no cancellations was because, once people had experienced the love of God, there was no turning back for them. Similarly, the fact that many were called but few were chosen was represented by the long waiting list of people wanting to stay at the hotel. Reservations in person recalled to mind that, one day, everyone will have to stand before God on judgment day, when it was hoped they would find a truly personal welcome awaiting them.

Since no one except Jesus Christ Himself had ever had a foretaste of heaven, likewise potential guests at the hotel were denied the opportunity, either to see what a room – or rather a suite – was like in advance, or to disturb a guest. A stay limited to one night was a reminder that one day with the Lord is like a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. And despite all the evil in the world, there was never any

shortage of people wanting to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, for that was what the truly sumptuous appointments in the hotel were intended to represent.

No one was ever charged for anything at the hotel to remind them that Jesus Christ had paid for the sins of the whole world through His death on the cross at Calvary. The price of all the wrongs we had ever done, all the sins we had ever committed, all the iniquities of which we were guilty, had already been paid. Just as Jesus had come in the clouds with His angels, so was each guest to experience the presence of their own ministering angel. Likewise, the availability of The Shoe Shine Boy at all times of the day or night served to remind guests that Jesus was Himself with them always, even unto the end of the world.

During His ministry on earth, Jesus preached Good News to the poor, healed the broken hearted, set prisoners free, caused the blind to see, and released those who were oppressed, hence He well knew the cause of each person's suffering. He also knew how to give rest to all who were afflicted in any way, and to bring them joy in the fullest meaning of the word. God gives sleep to those who love Him, while the beautiful music with which each guest is serenaded reminds us of the angels who surround the throne of God singing praises to His name day and night.

“In a word”, concluded The Shoe Shine Boy, “we want to give as many guests as possible a brief glimpse of the beauty and wonder of heaven so that they never, ever aspire to be anywhere else when their course on earth is run”.

“But why a shoeshine boy?”

“Because in a beautiful display of humble servanthood, Jesus washed the feet of His disciples. In this day and age, I realize I can't do that for our guests, but I can

clean their shoes, and this I felt was the closest I could get to following the example of our beloved Savior. Now let me get you copies of your accounts so that you can be on your way”.

“But.....”

“I know”, said The Shoe Shine Boy with a smile, putting up a restraining hand, “your account has already been paid, but we find our guests like to take with them a written confirmation of that fact”.

So saying, he handed each of us a beautiful leather folder. Inside was an account on the hotel’s letterhead that read as follows:

To giving you words that will last forever, even though the sky and the earth will not

To showing you how to live, through being the embodiment of God’s word

To bringing you the truth about how you can be saved

To having your sins forgiven in my name if you will but have faith in me

To enabling you to live in peace with God because of who I am

To speaking to God for you through being at His right hand

To having God accept you because of your faith in me

To treating you better than you deserve, making you acceptable to God, and giving you the hope of eternal life

To teaching you that you will receive whatever you request if you pray in faith

To teaching you to be an adopted child of God

To showing kindness to you in accordance with God's plan made even before time began

To leading you and making your faith complete

To showing you the true God who gives eternal life

To giving you peace, not such that the world can give, but that only I can give, and as a result of which you should neither be troubled nor afraid; also, because you are mine, for enabling God to grant you peace that no one can understand

To enabling you to say "Amen" because I said "Yes" to every one of God's promises

To teaching you how to pray; that when you and at least one other agree about something for which you are praying, God will make it happen; further, that whenever two or three of you get together in my name, I will be with you

To teaching you that the most important commandment is to love God with all your heart, your soul, your mind and your strength; also, that the next most important commandment is to love everyone else as much as you love yourself

To forgiving you your sins and setting you free

To understanding your every weakness

To allowing my blood to wash all your sins away

To teaching you to ask that you might receive; to seek that you may find, and to knock that the door will be opened for you

To helping you when you are tempted

To teaching you to give God first place in your life and to do the things He wants you to do

To teaching you that how you treat others is how you will be treated yourself

To teaching you that, those who have heard my message and have faith in God,  
will live forever

oooOOOooo

In the far right hand column of the account, where all the entries had been bracketed together, were the words, 'No Charge'. Across the face of the account was the imprint of a very large rubber stamp bearing the words in red, 'Paid in Full'.

We were all silent for a long time. Eventually, I was able to compose myself sufficiently to thank the Shoe Shine Boy on behalf of us all as fervently as I could for all that he had done for us. I then went on to ask if there was any way in which we could even hope to repay his overwhelming kindness towards us.

"Like Mary", came the reply, "please keep in your heart the things I have written and spoken to you about, and always remember, as I have tried very hard to do, that when you see someone in need of any kind, it is more blessed to give than to receive".

"I know I speak for all of us when I say that we will most certainly do these things", I responded quickly. "And speaking of giving, we'd like to give our personal thanks to the owner of the hotel for the exemplary service we have received during our stay, most especially from you. Would you be able to arrange for us to meet the owner, please?"

"I am the owner", smiled The Shoe Shine Boy in reply.

For further reading: Genesis 3:7-11, 21; Psalms 32:5; Romans 3:23-24; Psalms 19:12-13;  
Romans 3:9-12; John 16:23-24; 2 Samuel 11:1-12, 25; Psalms 51; Hebrews 12:17;  
Proverbs 28:13; Ephesians 2:14; 1 John 1:9; Acts 24:16; Isaiah 44:22; John 8:36; Romans  
7:18, 23-25; Psalms 40:13; Romans 8:1; Philippians 3:13-14; 4:4-9; Psalms 69:1-36; 2  
Corinthians 4:8-12; Romans 8:31-39; Isaiah 40:30-31; Psalms 62:1-8; Exodus 18:13-26;  
1 Peter 5:7; Psalms 42:5; 34:4; Matthew 6:33-34; Revelation 21:3-4; Job 2:12-13; Isaiah  
53:3; Lamentations 3:32; Matthew 5:4; John 11:35, 25-26; 3:16; 14:1-6; 1 Corinthians  
15:51-52; Mark 8:36; 1 Peter 1:3-5; Psalms 27:4-6; James 1:19-20; Colossians 3:8;  
Proverbs 29:11; 15:1; Ephesians 4:22-24; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 5:16; Colossians  
3:16; Psalms 27:14; Hebrews 5:14; James 1:2-4; Philippians 4:11; Romans 5:3-5; 1  
Thessalonians 5:14-15; Psalms 37:1,7; 2 Corinthians 10:5; Galatians 2:20; Colossians  
3:1; Galatians 5:22-23; 1 Corinthians 13:4-5; 2 Peter 1:5-9; James 5:7-8; 2 Peter 3:9;  
Matthew 28:20; Luke 4:18; Mark 13:31; 2 Timothy 3:16; Ephesians 1:13; Acts 10:43;  
Romans 5:1, 8:34; Galatians 2:16; Titus 3:7; Matthew 21:22; 2 Timothy 1:9; Hebrews  
12:2; 1 John 5:20; 14:27; 2 Corinthians 1:20; Matthew 6:5-15, 18:19-20; Mark 12:28-31;  
Colossians 1:14; Hebrews 4:15; 1 John 1:7; Matthew 7:7; Hebrews 2:18; Luke 6:38; John  
5:24; Luke 2:19; Acts 20:35

## **A Child Gives Thanks**

I very much enjoy public speaking, but I sometimes wonder if I will ever reach the heights of simple elegance of eight-year old Roger.

The principal of his school had just announced the Student of the Year award, stating that this was the first time it had ever been given to someone so young in a school of fifteen hundred pupils.

During the past year, Roger had gone from truant to perfect attendance; from a student with no known musical ability to membership of the school orchestra, and from being a loner to community service leader in his class. Academically, his progress was such that he was well on his way to making up for the years of study he had lost.

Few of us parents in the audience did not know that Roger had been unwell, to put it kindly, since the day he started school. No formal diagnosis was ever given but none of us wanted our own children to be in a class or other activity when Roger was present. But this past year he had somehow managed to put all this behind him, and by the time he had finished responding to the principal's inquiry as to whether he would like to say anything, few of us could have felt unmoved by what he had to say.

"I want to thank Mrs. Birchell for teaching me to play the violin. One day she said it sometimes happens that a child who is not like other children in one way can make up for it really well in another. I've never understood why I'm not like other children, but that didn't stop Mrs. Birchell trying to find out if there wasn't something I was really good at. She first tried to teach me to sing but she very soon said I couldn't. Next she tried me on the piano but that didn't work either. She said it seemed as if I didn't like

loud noises, which I don't, and that's why she played the violin for me. I liked it very much as soon as I heard it and now I'm in the school orchestra.

"I really look forward to my violin lessons, as well as practicing with Mrs. Birchell after school every day. It is more fun than missing classes when I really had no place to go anyway.

"I want to thank Mr. Henry for letting me take part in so many community activities. I told him how much I enjoyed learning to play the violin. He said it was very kind of Mrs. Birchell to teach me: we should all be willing to help other people as she had done. I told him I couldn't do that because nobody liked me, I was always getting into trouble and I was always by myself.

"Mr. Henry said he was taking some children in the class to a place where old people live because it made them happy to see us. All we had to do was talk to them, play simple games with them, help them in little ways and make them happy. Mr. Henry asked if I would like to go. I said yes because playing games sounded like fun.

"We had a very good time, everyone was very nice and they all said they liked me. Even the children in the bus going back to school were nice to me. I asked Mr. Henry if I could go again and he said yes. We have been to many different places and I've enjoyed them all.

"I want to thank Mrs. Stevens (the principal) for letting me stay at school. I know I've been bad but she said it was perhaps because I was unwell, although no one's told me what's wrong with me. I just know I have to take so much medication all the time.

"But most of all I want to thank my grandma. There she is sitting with my mom and dad and my sister. Mom tells me grandma came to live with us after grandpa died.

Grandma stayed in my room with me and was always there for me whenever I came home or when we went out.

“The first night she arrived she read me a story from the Bible and said a prayer for me. I had never seen that done before. She told me about God and how He lives in my heart. She told me He will always look out for me and will never leave me. She said we must always do our very best for Him because He loves us so much. One day we will all get to meet Him. We want Him to be pleased to see us.

“Grandma also told me that God had a Son called Jesus. He died because of all the bad things people did. But if we behaved properly, God would forgive us when we did wrong things and said we were sorry. God would go on loving us no matter what. He said we must love everyone else just as we love ourselves.

“I really liked it when Grandma talked to me about these things. I’ve tried very hard to be good ever since the day she came to our house and that’s why I want to thank her more than anyone for all that she has done for me”.

Further reading: Proverbs 23:18; Romans 15:13, 12:2; Jeremiah 29:12-14; Psalms 9:10; Romans 8:39; Ephesians 2:10; Exodus 15:2; Jeremiah 29:11; Ephesians 5: 15-16

## Danny Boy

“I would like you to imagine just for a moment that the time is 7:29 PM on the evening of St. Patrick’s Day. You are seated at a table at the far right of the front row in the dining room that doubles up as an auditorium when we put on entertainment for our elderly residents. All but two, and their many guests, are in attendance, eagerly awaiting the start of an evening of Irish music we have arranged for them, as we do every year.

“I want you to understand that our St. Patrick’s Day entertainment is the highlight of the year for our residents. You might think Christmas was, but not everyone can go home to family and friends at that time and for those who can’t, Christmas can be a lonely time, no matter how hard we try to make it otherwise.

“At precisely 7:30 PM, as planned, the curtain rises – to reveal an empty stage. In the ensuing silence you could have heard that proverbial pin drop. And then we heard it, very quietly at first, but then gradually getting louder: it was someone singing that perhaps best loved of all Irish ballads, Danny Boy.

Oh Danny Boy, the pipes, the pipes are calling,  
From glen to glen and down the mountain side;  
The summer’s gone and all the roses falling,  
‘Tis you, ‘tis you must go and I must bide.

“At this point the singer entered the rear of the dining room, having presumably started at the end of the hallway by the back door. Everyone turned to look at him, and what a splendid sight he made. Resplendent in green, he might have stepped straight off the stage of any of the world’s finest opera houses. Big of build and with a voice to

match, he must have set many a heart a-fluttering throughout his singing career. His voice rising to a crescendo, he continued:

But come ye back when summer's in the meadow,  
Or when the valley's hushed and white with snow.  
    'Tis I'll be here in sunshine or in shadow,  
Oh Danny Boy, oh Danny Boy, I love you so.

“Having followed him with our eyes as he slowly made his way down the length of the dining room, we watched as he mounted the platform and turned to face us. Moving the microphone quietly to one side with a knowing smile, he regaled us with the second, haunting verse.

But when ye come, and all the flow'rs are dying,  
    If I am dead, as dead I well may be,  
Ye'll come and find the place where I am lying,  
    And kneel and say an Ave there for me.

“ Again that glorious build up on the way to that superb high ‘A’:

And I shall hear, though soft you tread above me,  
    And all my grave will warmer, sweeter be,  
For you will bend and tell me that you love me,  
And I shall sleep in peace until you come to me.

“After the rapturous, sustained applause had died away, the singer held us spellbound for the next hour with a quite marvelous rendition of all our favorite Irish songs, inviting us encouragingly to sing along with him. How the residents and their guests loved it.

“At the end of the hour, the singer repeated Danny Boy for us, leaving the way he had come, his powerful voice eventually trailing away in the distance.

“To this day I do not know who he was or how he came to be with us that St. Patrick’s Day. What I do know is what Jesus taught us and that is that, if you have faith in God, you can say unto this mountain, away with you and be you cast into the sea and it shall be done.

“So let me tell you about my mountain. Knowing the importance of St. Patrick’s Day to our residents, as their activities director, I had started a whole year earlier to find them really first rate entertainment for the following year. It was hugely difficult. Understandably, top-notch performers do not put gratis entertainment at the top of their list. Eventually, I did find a young but impressive singer who told me frankly that, since he was just starting out in his career, he would welcome the exposure. He also assured me he would not let me down, even coming to check out our facility in advance so as to know where to set up his gear.

“On St. Patrick’s Day eve - yes, literally the day before – he called to say he had come down with food poisoning and hence would not be able to perform for us, and no, he didn’t know who else to call.

“By this time of course I had already printed out a little program advising one and all of the entertainment that had been arranged, while the dining room had long since been colorfully decorated with leaping leprechauns.

“But perhaps most important of all was the build-up of excitement amongst the residents. For months now they had been asking me how the preparations were going, what was being arranged and how many guests could they bring.

“In the beginning, when just nothing was happening, I would quietly remind them to have faith and all would be well; after all, I would add, you only need faith the size of a mustard seed to move a mountain.

“I know,” I remember one resident telling me, “Your faith is legendary around here, Shirley.”

“And so I quietly continued recalling some other words that Jesus said about faith. After we have asked God in faith for our mountain to be removed, we must not have any doubt in our heart that it will indeed happen; rather, we must truly believe that it will, in which case nothing shall be impossible for us.

“The Bible tells us that faith is something we hope for, not evidence of something we have seen. I once heard it put this way. When Roger Bannister, as he then was, set out to run a four-minute mile, he didn’t know he could do it because it had never been done before: if it had, that would have been knowledge, not faith. But he had faith in his own ability, in his excellent and unselfish pacesetters and many other things besides. Thus, it came to pass and was not impossible for him.

“The Bible also tells us that, whatever we do, we must do it heartily as to the Lord and not unto others, knowing that, in so doing, we shall serve the Lord Christ. God knew

how diligently I had tried to make a success of our St. Patrick's Day celebrations, hence I knew that my faith would not be misplaced.

“And while all this was going on, God gave me something else to sustain me – that peace which passes all understanding. Jesus put it this way: “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you; not the way the world gives it to you, but as I do. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.”

“Consequently, I knew with absolute certainty that, as they say in the entertainment world, “all will be well on the night”, and it was. To the best of my knowledge, not one single resident or guest would ever have known what had occurred if I hadn't told them. The program had advertised a vocalist and a vocalist had performed, magnificently as it happened. That I did tell them was because I wanted to build up their faith, as I want to build up yours.

“So the next time you are faced with a mountain that needs to be removed – you've lost your job, let's say, and you have to find another one because the Bible tells us if we don't work we don't deserve to eat – take it to the Lord in prayer. Have faith in Him, have no doubts, believe it will happen and nothing shall be impossible unto you.

“And think of me, and if I shall have gone to my eternal rest, remember if you should pass my way:

And I shall hear, though soft you tread above me,

And all my grave will warmer, sweeter be,

For you will bend and tell me that you love me,

And I shall sleep in peace until you come to me”.

For further reading: Mark 11:22-24; Matthew 17:20; Hebrews 11:1; Colossians 3:23-24;

Philippians 4:7; John 14:27; 2 Thessalonians 3:10

## **The Man with the Crucifix**

The island was small and beautiful, as was its population, but unemployment was rising.

As Travis watched a group of listless young men and women on the beach, an idea began to form in his mind.

He remembered reading somewhere that the goodness of God's creation can be manifested in art, music, literature, dance and theatre. He also remembered he had an action research project to complete at the forthcoming conclusion of his studies.

A young woman was idly kicking some pebbles in the sand where the waves gently lapped the shore. There was a grace and dignity about her simple but repeated movements that made Travis think of a dance. And where there was dance there was music, and where there was music there could be song. The whole could be turned into an art form set against some of the most beautiful ocean scenery in the world.

The island population had a rich heritage of folklore and music. Dressed in bright colorful clothes, the normally happy and smiling people welcomed each other gladly as they moved about the island.

Travis turned over in his mind the idea of a dance that would begin with the graceful movements of the quickstep before increasing in tempo through the rumba and salsa to a fiery tango: he would call his dance The QRST. Thus would he portray the dignity and grace with which the people of the island handled unemployment, to be replaced by the growing exuberance of finding work that would enrich their lives.

Music, story and song to accompany the dance would come from folklore intrinsic to the island, giving birth to a theatrical performance that would captivate

audiences the world over. In this way there would be employment opportunities for all, including those who could neither dance nor sing.

Anxious to tackle the problem of unemployment as quickly as he could, Travis shared his idea with anyone who would listen while his project began to take shape. The response was immediate and electrifying, so much so he was able to enliven his project presentation with a suggested story line – thus providing the literature element – as well as a proposed musical score, dance steps, folk songs and ocean setting as a theatrical backdrop.

The awarding body received his report with alacrity, inviting him to make a second presentation to a full meeting of the board of trustees. Here his flair and enthusiasm led to his being asked to put together a working group charged with producing a complete theatrical production. Soon auditions were being held throughout the length and breadth of the island for anyone who wished to be part of the making of a chapter in the island's history.

As the production neared completion, Travis began to receive inquiries from impresarios and others on the mainland about bringing his musical to world class studios and related facilities preparatory to the organization of a world tour. Travis politely declined to pursue all such inquiries.

Returning home from the first and triumphant dress rehearsal, he was surprised to see a large and impressive limousine drawn up outside the small house in which he lived with his parents. The limousine, which must have been brought especially to the island, appeared to be being guarded by two men in dark suits and glasses.

Travis decided to take a circuitous route to the rear of his house from where he was able to enter unobserved through the back door. Once inside he heard his father telling an unknown visitor or visitors that only Travis could make the decision they were seeking.

Nothing was said for some time, whereupon Travis quietly entered the room where the visitors were; his father graciously introduced him to them.

They had come in person to invite Travis to “take the island to the mainland” where fame and fortune awaited him: after all, his QRST dance was already taking the mainland by storm.

To anyone else the visitors might have made a convincing case, but on hearing them out, Travis asked them to accompany him, and his father, to a room at the back of the house. On entering, he exclaimed that the room had been his sister’s before she had died so tragically on the mainland. On a garlanded pedestal in front of the fireplace was an open Bible. Travis exclaimed that he and his parents referred to the Bible for guidance whenever an important decision needed to be made.

Deftly turning the pages with a practiced hand, Travis invited his visitors to read with him in the presence of his father, the commandment given by God Himself to “Honor your father and mother”.

Travis went on to say that, on the day of his sister’s death, he had given his word to the Lord his God that, being now an only child, he would never leave the island, thereby honoring his father and mother.

After a long period of silence, one of the visitors reached inside his shirt and drew out a most beautiful and expensive crucifix. Pulling the chain from which it hung over his

head, he slowly, almost reverently, placed it over Travis' head and around his neck where it hung openly displayed.

“Would that I had had a son like you” was all that he would say.

The sound of the QRST dance began to be heard from the beach, to which they all repaired.

A young woman was kicking some pebbles in the sand where the waves gently lapped the shore. She did so with carefully studied intent and a grace and dignity that was a delight to watch.

Her beautiful routine complete, Travis lifted his eyes to the far side of the bay and imagined he saw hotels, jetties and a small airstrip under construction, bringing a sustained and buoyant economy to the island, along with full employment.

No, he would not take the island to the mainland, but with the help of the man with the crucifix, he would bring the mainland to the island. Thus would he remain true to the vow he had made the day his sister died, as well as to the commandment given by the Lord his God to honor his father and mother.

For further reading: Psalms 32:8; Romans 8:28; Isaiah 40:28-31; Psalms 84:11;

Philippians 4:19; John 14:21; Deuteronomy 5:16; Proverbs 16:3; Luke 1:37

## **A Birthday Remembered**

“Don’t you have a home to go to?” inquired the security officer gently, “it’s almost midnight”.

“I know”, Ursula replied, “but I wanted to make sure I had followed the instructions I was given to the letter”.

“Try not to be anxious about anything. Instead, through prayer and petition with grateful thanks give your requests over to God”.

“I know – you’re right. I must trust in God with all my heart and not look to my own ways. If I acknowledge Him in everything I do, He will show me the way He wants me to go”.

“That said, can I be of any help when my shift ends in a few minutes?”

“Thank you. If you really wanted to, you could give me an idea for a gift to give to a late night flight crew; something inexpensive I could repeat all the time, but thoughtful and caring as well; something simple and fun that they will talk about”.

“I’ll return in just a moment”. When he did, the security officer handed Ursula a bar of chocolate.

“Today is my birthday and tomorrow I retire; in all my twenty year’s of service my special day has never once been acknowledged, while in the company where my brother works, everyone gets a paid day off on their birthday. At the end of each birthday, if I was working, I would buy myself one of these bars of chocolate from the vending machine and tell myself it came from the company which it did in a way, didn’t it? You will note this particular bar is high in chocolate, low in fat and has a six-month shelf life. Who wouldn’t be pleased to be given such a simple, thoughtful and delicious little gift?”

“What a splendid idea”, enthused Ursula, adding that, with fewer flights at night, there would be time for her to look up each crew member’s birthday before the briefing she gave to the crews prior to departure.

“Of course, not everyone will have a birthday on the actual day of their flight”, continued the security officer, “but some will be close enough and, anyway, news of such recognition will travel fast. I’m sure the gesture will be appreciated way beyond the cost of a simple bar of chocolate”.

“That’s exactly what I’ll do”, exclaimed Ursula, “thank you so much. You know, I still find it hard to understand why there’s never previously been any briefing at all for late night crews. I’m told there have been a number of attempts to establish such a schedule but never with any success. That’s why I’ve volunteered for a new shift from 3 PM to 11:30 PM. I’m hoping the crews will be pleased to have a briefing supervisor present for the first time: if I then bring out a bar of chocolate...another thought is that many crew members won’t have flown together before so this little gesture really could give them something to talk about, couldn’t it?”

“Yes, and speaking of something to talk about, it’s time you called it a day and I checked out at the end of my shift. For our newest and perhaps youngest member of staff you’re setting a fine, conscientious example but we all need our beauty sleep, me especially”.

“I know. I’m sorry. I’ll pack up my things and leave with you right now”.

As they walked together through the building, Ursula remarked to the security officer that, at a recent Bible study, she had been told about a man called Saul whom God had made king over Israel. At first, Saul couldn’t understand this because he was from

the smallest tribe of Israel while his clan was the least of all the clans of the tribe of Benjamin. Later, although given explicit instructions to destroy every last one of the enemy in battle, Saul did not do so. This grieved the Lord that He had made Saul King of Israel.

“So, while I may be the newest and perhaps youngest member of staff”, continued Ursula, “God may still require great things of me. And you can be sure I will always try to set a fine, conscientious example in everything I do - never, ever, intentionally disobeying what I believe to be His will. Assuredly, I will do my very best to keep my conscience clear before both God and every last one of all His people. Then will He keep me wholly at peace because my mind is set on Him alone and because He knows I trust in Him”.

The new briefing schedule was warmly welcomed when Ursula outlined it the following afternoon. She said nothing about giving out a bar of chocolate in recognition of a crewmember’s birthday but could hardly wait to put the idea into practice. It was to prove a great success.

Before her evening briefings, Ursula made sure she had time to attend the retirement function put on by the company for the security officer. She was pleased to see it was quite a grand affair with the guest of honor being invited to choose a watch for himself from the catalog of a well-known brand.

Ursula positioned herself to be the last to pay tribute to the retiree. Standing respectfully beside him, she explained to the gathering why she was presenting him with a simple bar of chocolate.

Right on cue, the immaculately attired, nineteen strong crew of an international flight entered the hall. With nineteen pairs of eyes fixed firmly upon her, Ursula asked, “Who had a birthday yesterday?” Nobody said a word.

Taking a bar of chocolate from her pocket, she paraded before the crew, extolling the virtues of her little gift, high in chocolate, low in fat and with a six-month shelf life. Still nobody said a word.

Completing her parade, the crew fell in behind her and one by one drew from their pockets an identical bar of chocolate which they handed to the security officer in turn, one for each of his twenty year’s of service.

For further reading: Philippians 4:6; Proverbs 3:5-6; 1 Samuel 9:21, 15:3, 34; Acts 24:16;  
Isaiah 26:3

## **You are a Child of God**

Go forth from hence, embrace this life, be all I'd have you be,  
Nothing is impossible when leaning hard on me;  
Come boldly to the throne of grace, trace every step I've trod,  
For remember, one and all, you're but a child of God.

With these stirring words ringing in his ears, Vincent stood up, gathered his things together, put them in his backpack, walked down the stairs of the theatre-style classroom and made for the door. There he stopped, put down his backpack, walked over to the whiteboard and wrote in large, bold letters:

Five things God cannot do –

Leave me

Forsake me

Stop loving me

Go back on His Word

Deny me the gift of salvation

Vincent walked back to the door, picked up his backpack and was on the point of leaving when the professor called him by name. Turning slowly around, Vincent heard the professor say:

“You have taught me, and perhaps all of us here this evening, a very valuable lesson. I invite you to take my place and share with us how you came by the convictions you so strongly hold”.

Vincent remained by the door while the professor gathered his things together, put them in his briefcase, walked up the stairs of the theatre-style classroom and sat down heavily in the place where Vincent had been. Vincent walked over to the professor's desk and turned to face the class.

“Always be prepared to give a reason for your faith. That is what the Bible tells us to do and that is what I sought to do today.

“When the professor referred most emphatically to God's omniscience and omnipotence, I felt compelled to remonstrate because there are five things God cannot do. That the professor said he would brook no argument on the matter, even to the point of asking anyone who held a contrary view to leave, only fueled my determination to be heard.

“Is the cucumber bitter? Cast it away. Are there briars in the path? Turn aside, nothing more is needed. Do not proceed to ask, ‘Why is the universe burdened with creations such as these?’

“I heard these words spoken a number of years ago and they brought me up short, for if there is a creation, then there must be a creator, even of me, for am I – are we not all – fearfully and wonderfully made?

“My search for a creator began with a study of Christianity for no other reason than that it was the only denomination with a place of worship near where I live. I went on to study other religions.

“I read how Buddhists, Mormons, Muslims and Unitarians believe adherents must earn their own salvation; how Christian Scientists believe that Jesus' death did not free people from their sins, and how Orthodox Jews do not believe that Christ was the

Messiah. Jehovah's Witnesses believe that people who fail to meet the standards of Jehovah will be exterminated, while Hindus think that people can attain salvation through, amongst other things, meditation.

“Thus in no other religion did I hear of a creator who had each of the five attributes you see before you, hence my search for my creator ended where it began – with the Word of God.

“As often as not, whenever I tried to make disciples of all nations, I would meet with rejection. At first, I found that hard to take. But I didn't want to leave matters there, because I soon realized it wasn't me that my hearers were rejecting but God. And knowing how much people miss out in life when God is not at the very center of their being, I knew I had to respond in a powerful, thought provoking and, I hope, memorable way.

“It occurred to me that one thing we all have in common is tribulation of one sort or another. It is at those times that we most need help in getting through the problems that so beset us: how marvelous if we could do so in a way that had us rejoicing at the same time, just as the Bible admonishes us to do.

“So I decided to do what the Bible tells us and that is always be prepared to give a reason for my Christianity – note I no longer use the otherwise unspecified word 'faith'. My reason, as you have seen today, is so that I can tell people that, no matter the trials and tribulations of this life, God will see us through, not because of what He can do, but because of what He can't.

“Before anyone has time to respond, I tell them there are five things God cannot do. I then pause for effect before continuing.

“God can never, ever leave you or forsake you. He can never, ever stop loving you no matter what you do. He can never, ever go back on His Word, and He can never, ever deny you the gift of salvation: whether you choose to accept it is up to you. I then go on to say that, if the one true God thinks this much of me, you can be sure I will never, ever leave Him or forsake Him. I will never, ever stop loving Him. I will never, ever go back on my word to Him, and I will do everything in my power to be worthy of His gift of salvation. I invite you to do the same.

“Wouldn’t it be wonderful if our nearest and dearest always felt the same way about us and we about them, especially in the dark night of the soul? But we know utopia doesn’t exist, don’t we? How much more then should we learn to trust and obey, to love unconditionally and to strive to be worthy of so great a love as God has to offer? How much more then should we learn to turn to Him and walk with Him through this transitory life, knowing that our light affliction is but for a moment and not to be compared to the treasures that await us in heaven?

“I had the very great privilege of being invited to propose the toast at a Quensinera for a young lady who knew what it was to be afflicted. In case you are not aware, a Quensinera is a ceremony observed by the Hispanic community to mark the occasion of a young lady’s fifteenth birthday when she is deemed to have arrived at the state of womanhood. I like to think it was the Lord Himself who gave me the words to say. I commend those of the last verse to you for your remembrance, now and always.

“You Are a Child of God

“Long before I formed you I had these words in mind,  
I had in view a special work, one of the lasting kind;  
I opened up the book of life, read all there was therein,  
I stopped at Proverbs thirty-one, beginning at verse ten.

“I knew you’d have temptation, troubles, trials and more,  
Heartaches, disasters, I knew what was in store;  
I put protection round you, a hedge both straight and tall,  
I poured my love out on you, just so you would not fall.

“I gave you strength for clothing and honor there is too,  
The law of kindness, wisdom – I gave these both to you;  
To price you above rubies I answered virtue’s call,  
Many daughters have done virtuously, thou exceedest all.

“Ere long you’ll hear the praises of a husband good and true,  
Your children shall arise and call you blessed too,  
For in a house where my love dwells shall all of them be raised,  
A woman who doth fear the Lord is greatly to be praised.

“Today you’ve come to womanhood and I’m so proud of you,  
You’ve had your tribulations but you’ve come smiling through;

Should they return, reach for my Word, remember this day when  
I stopped at Proverbs thirty-one beginning at verse ten.

“Go forth from hence, embrace this life, be all I’d have you be,  
Nothing is impossible when leaning hard on me,  
Come boldly to the throne of grace, trace every step I’ve trod,  
For remember, one and all, you’re but a child of God”.

For further reading: Hebrews 4:16, 13:5; Nehemiah 9:31; Malachi 3:6; Isaiah 54:10;  
1 Peter 3:15; Psalms 139:14; Matthew 28:19; 1 Peter 4:12-19; 2 Corinthians 4:17;  
Proverbs 31:10-31

## **But for the love of Christ**

I would like to tell you about Wendy. It won't take long and you could find the lessons invaluable. I certainly did.

At the time, Wendy had a car that was nine years old and had done over 175,000 miles. It was in excellent condition, having been faithfully serviced every five thousand miles. It looked good, ran well and Wendy wouldn't have changed it for the world. It carried a lot of memories with it wherever they went.

One day, a high school friend with whom Wendy had kept in close touch, called from overseas to say he was returning home for an important meeting. He asked what the chances were of their getting together for old time's sake. Wendy said she'd be delighted to make time for an old friend. On hearing where the meeting was to be held, Wendy offered to take the day off work and drive her friend to his appointment. It was then he asked her what car she had.

Wendy explained enthusiastically about her much loved car and hoped her friend would see at once why it held such appeal for her. But her friend replied that, in view of the importance of the meeting he had to attend, and the prestigious address of the private house in which it was to be held, perhaps Wendy's car was not the most appropriate in which to arrive. How would she feel about taking him to a nearby five star hotel from where he would hire a car for himself? Wendy said that would be fine and that is what they decided to do.

The conversation over, Wendy went for a long walk, debating within herself whether she wasn't perhaps guilty of clinging to the past, her car being a case in point. She had never thought this way before but now she began to have doubts.

Wendy decided she liked her car and her job, most especially the people with whom she worked, far too much to want to make a change in either case, although she acknowledged to herself that she had been with the same company a number of years.

A long time ago, Wendy had been advised that, if she couldn't enrich the job she then had, she could always enrich her life outside it if, for whatever reason, she didn't want to change. Having been educated to degree standard but not really having had the opportunity to work at that level, had she, for example, considered studying for a Masters' Degree?

The very idea had electrified her but for one reason or another her attempts to apply herself to such a course of study had come to naught. Now, however, was the time for renewed action: a throwaway remark from a friend which at first had been a disappointment to her, would become a turning point in her life.

No sooner said than done and Wendy found herself reading deep into the night about the fascinating world of economics. From there it was but a step to learning about investing, a subject that gripped her from the start.

Shortly before graduation, Wendy made her first small investment in the field of real estate: now there was no holding her back. Over the years she built up an impressive portfolio and ere long was earning very substantially more from it than from her work. Wendy was rich and well on her way to becoming wealthy.

At one of the many investment conferences and seminars Wendy regularly attended she met her Mr. Right. No longer in the first flush of youth, she didn't want to lose him even though he was not of her faith which, up to then, had meant so much to her.

Slowly, without realizing it, Wendy began to believe her fiancé when he congratulated her most warmly, and it must be said, sincerely, on the success she had made of her life. It was no longer her first thought, as once it had been, to put God first in her life, thanking Him for the manifold blessings and infinite mercies He had bestowed upon her. Perhaps there was truth in the saying that love is blind.

Discussing the wording of a prenuptial agreement with her accountant, she was astounded to hear him say there was really very little left of her fortune following turmoil in certain property markets. He was most surprised to hear she did not know of these developments. In essence, he said, she had three choices: remain invested and risk losing everything; liquidate her holdings and get out with whatever she could before the situation got even worse, or diversify her holdings in order to spread her risk. He appreciated the last option flew in the face of her oft quoted aversion to diversification in favor of focus.

Driving home, Wendy turned on the radio for comfort and found herself listening to the voice of a well-known pastor and broadcaster. He was telling the story of King David who had sinned grievously in the eyes of the Lord. Confronted with his wrongdoing by the prophet Gad, he was told God had given him three choices: three years of famine; three years of running away from his enemies, or three days of plague in the land. David chose to fall into the hands of the Lord, causing a plague on Israel from which 70,000 people died.

It was then Wendy recalled something she had heard long ago in Sunday school: it is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of a living God...but for the love of Christ.

For further reading: 1 Thessalonians 5:18; Colossians 3:15; Psalms 140:13;

2 Samuel 24:11-15; 1 Chronicles 21:9-14; Hebrews 10:31

## **An Unmarked Grave**

There's an unmarked grave in the cemetery behind the immaculately maintained little church high up in the hills. Residents will tell you it is in homage to Pastor Xavier who had told them so unselfishly he would not accept anything from them even though he had single-handedly breathed new life into the once prosperous little community.

Pastor Xavier was fulfilling an ambition to ride his powerful new motorcycle the length and breadth of the land, stopping at the smallest and most isolated of settlements on the way to inquire if they were in need of pastoral care.

In the only village store, he had inquired about the seeming lack of life. He was told that, after the steel mill had closed down some years ago, time had all but stood still for most of the village; only a few families remained and then simply out of fear as to what would happen to their land if they left it.

Over the years, everyone else had moved to far off places in search of work that for the most part had proved hard to find. Whatever money they could spare, which wasn't a lot, they sent back to their families in the village.

Pastor Xavier remarked on the few but fine looking fruits and vegetables he had seen growing behind the store. The proprietor said that was his way of supplementing his income since proceeds from the store were too little to support him and his wife. Pastor Xavier also remarked on the surprisingly beautiful clothes the proprietor's wife was wearing and which she shyly said she had made herself, all by hand. Having noticed a poorly clad old man on the way to the store, Pastor Xavier asked if the proprietor's wife had thought of making clothes for other people. "Why certainly," had been the prompt

reply, “but they don’t have the money to pay for them even though I was practically giving them away”.

Since money was so tight and the needs of the people so few and modest, Pastor Xavier inquired if thought had been given to operating a simple barter system amongst the residents of the village, thus doing away with the need for money at all. He was told no such thought had been entertained, but as everyone knew each other so well, there would be no harm in at least talking about it.

Thus encouraged, and saying he had no desire to interfere but with a specific reason for asking, Pastor Xavier inquired what people did with the few funds they received from their family members who had moved away. “We all try to save them for emergencies if we can,” was the response.

Probing gently, Pastor Xavier said, since everyone knew everyone else so well, it might be an idea to pool their resources and use them to make micro loans for causes that would benefit the whole community such as a small kiln in which to bake bread. The surplus could be sold to residents of neighboring villages.

The idea had quickly taken hold, the first such loan being given to the proprietor of the general store to enable him to grow fruits and vegetables in greater abundance. It was in tribute to Pastor Xavier that the little community had decided to plant the various seeds all around the church where normally one might expect to see flowers. The second micro loan went to the store proprietor’s wife to enable her to buy a sewing machine with which to make clothes.

The proceeds from these small but additional income sources meant that the loans could be repaid and new ones granted. Before long, the little community grew financially

stronger and more influential in its dealings with its neighbors, so much so that the ability to grant micro loans resulted in a commendable degree of self-sufficiency. A really added blessing was that one or two people had returned to work in the community, thus strengthening it still further.

Reminiscent of Harvest Festival, Pastor Xavier had suggested that a Service of Thanksgiving be held in the little church. Village folk came from far and wide, as much to thank Pastor Xavier for the wonderful influence he had had on their lives, as to offer thanks to Almighty God for His unfailing provision in all things.

Pastor Xavier had taken as his text from the Bible, 1 Thessalonians 5:18 in which Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus, had exhorted his audience always to be joyful, to pray constantly, and to give thanks no matter what the circumstances because this is God's will for His people in Christ Jesus.

The message was most gladly received and the celebrations that followed were as joyful as could be imagined. If there was a twinge of sadness it was because Pastor Xavier had let it be known that he would be moving on in the morning. He said he felt the pastoral care he had tried to bestow upon the now growing community was bearing fruit, almost literally: it was therefore time for him to seek out other sheep in need of a shepherd.

The people of the village and their neighbors gave Pastor Xavier a wonderful sendoff before he roared off down the road on his motorcycle. Tragically, before he had gone very far, he struck a deer that suddenly sprang into the road in front of him. He died instantly.

It wasn't easy for the people to remain joyful following Pastor Xavier's death, especially when they recalled his saying so unselfishly he would not accept anything from them. However, through constant prayer they were able to offer up expressions of heartfelt thanksgiving for all that he had done for them, as well as for the ongoing legacy he had left behind and which they knew with certainty would reap a rich harvest in the years to come.

And that is why there's an unmarked grave in the cemetery behind the immaculately maintained little church high up in the hills.

For further reading: 2 Kings 5:16; 2 Timothy 2:15; 1 Corinthians 3:8; 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12; Acts 20:35; Ecclesiastes 2:24, 3:13, 22; 8:15; 1 Timothy 5:18; 1 Thessalonians 5:18

## **Do You Know Who I Am?**

All was quiet in the darkened room of the isolation ward at a major Christian research hospital, save only for the gentle humming of the monitors. The nurse's eyes glanced knowingly from one to the next and back again. If the doctor's predictions were right, the patient would soon recover consciousness. The nurse wanted to be there when he did.

Shortly thereafter their eyes met, the nurse smiled in relief and welcomed the patient back to the land of the living.

“Where am I?”

Yolanda told him. “We can run some more tests now you're conscious so in a day or two we should have a much better idea of what particular illness it is you've contracted. What we can tell you right away is the extent to which you have abused your health will not have helped your cause. It also stands to make your recovery that much longer to achieve, as well as increase the likelihood of your having done even greater harm to yourself”.

“Do you know who I am?” inquired the patient.

“Yes, I know who you are. You're my 99<sup>th</sup> patient in this particular ward. You're also a well-known actor of stage and screen whose every performance I've tried to see. But what I'm witnessing now is not a performance I or any of your legions of fans ever want to see again. No one can know the extent of another's pain, but I'm fairly sure the way you're feeling now must seem like the curtain's come down for the last time. To me, however, it's the trumpet sound of victory because I haven't lost a patient yet and I'm not about to do so now”.

“What can you do for me I can’t do for myself if I put my mind to it? How do you know I’m not serious about wanting to change the wretched person I’ve become?”

“I can tell you with absolute certainty that you cannot – will not – get better by yourself. You will have already tried that, indeed told yourself that, times without number. For the moment, while we’ll do all we possibly can to get you well again, you have to know things will get a lot worse before they get better. But if you play your part while we play ours, you’ll pull through, just like all the others. The part we want you to play as a direct aid to your recovery is to strike a strong, positive attitude by seeing yourself - willing yourself – to be well again. Just as good, nutritious food feeds a healthy body, so do positive, uplifting thoughts develop and empower a strong mind”.

The patient nodded appreciatively.

“To get you started, because I want you to lie perfectly still for quite some while, I’m going to tell you about some people whose experiences should give you cause for great hope.

“The first, also from the world of entertainment, couldn’t handle the success he achieved, so he turned to alcohol and drugs. But in a matter of months, he surprised everyone by saying he had embraced Christianity. Today he’s a pastor who has planted many churches but still performs occasionally. We’ll make a date to go and see him when you’re back on your feet again.

“The next man was the wealthiest, wisest and most powerful in the world in his day. Just to read the account of the provisions for his household on a daily basis is to appreciate the vastness of his empire. And yet when he thought about it all, he realized everything was meaningless, that there was still something missing in his life. He came to

understand what he lacked could be possessed by the poorest peasant in the land – a meaningful relationship with God the Father.

“You referred to yourself as a “wretched person” a moment ago: so did the third man I’m thinking of, and yet he strove consciously not to be so. But he found himself doing things he knew he shouldn’t, as well as not doing things he knew he should. Christianity was also his path to salvation and the speeches he gave exhorting others to turn from sin to Jesus Christ are as meaningful today as they were in his.

“One speech in particular completely changed my life, as I pray it will yours. It was about the blessings that are in Christ Jesus for those who believe in Him – for those who have put sin and abuse behind them and renewed their life in Christ. Hold still and let me tell you about not one, not two, but seven blessings which are yours for the asking. Listen carefully and be mindful of the circumstances that have brought you here today.

“First, there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ because He and He alone bore the penalty of our sins. That means we will go straight to heaven when our life on earth is through. This is true even if, while we are here, we still fall short of the godly Christian we strive to be and for which we feel guilty. That guilt, by the way, is not God talking to us but the enemy, so don’t pay any heed to this voice. God’s not holding anything against us: He accepts us simply because we are in Christ. As soon as we accept Him, we are as righteous as we can be because righteousness comes by faith in Christ Jesus. It is attainable: it is that close if we will but confess with our mouth that Jesus is Lord.

“Second, we have the blessing of victory over sin and abuse. None of us can conquer sin by ourselves - I told you that moments ago – but God will give us the victory through the Spirit that dwells in us through prayer, fellowship and Christian service.

“Third, we have the blessing of adoption because we are the children of God. People think God is angry and judgmental towards us but He is not. He pities us. We don't stop loving our children when they misbehave, so why should we think God would stop loving us when we misbehave? No, we cry out, “Abba, Father”, and He responds with the love for all peoples manifested in His own Son, Jesus Christ. Read the New Testament and you will know what it truly means to be loved by God.

“Fourth, and you might find this especially appealing, our present suffering is nothing when compared with the eternal weight of glory that is to come. God is praying for us in eternity and He loves us eternally.

“Fifth, we know that all things work together for good for those who love the Lord. Just look at the life of Joseph in the Old Testament and Jesus in the New to affirm that statement. Through Christ's death, God brought salvation to all peoples. We should learn to try looking at the vastness of the galaxy and remind ourselves that God is so great there is nothing in our lives He can't put right.

“Sixth, if God be for us, who can be against us? No one can ever conquer or defeat us. We are the apple of His eye and more than conquerors through Him who loves us.

“Seventh, nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus. We are in Christ and as such we are justified and glorified. God has saved us and

nothing in the created world can ever separate us from the love of God if we are in Christ. God has made a way for all of us to be in Him – out of sin and death – through Jesus Christ.

“One final word. God will never be a debtor to us: He will never owe us anything. But as for us, as we give, so will it be given to us, and if we give generously we shall also receive generously and vice versa. So the more we give to God, the more He’ll give to us. I urge you, therefore, to give your life to God through Jesus Christ. And to do so willingly and happily, for God loves a cheerful giver. And then see if God will not bring so much blessing into your life you will not have room enough to contain it.

“There, I’m done with the tests. Thank you for being such an obliging patient”.

“As an actor”, came the response, “I shall have no difficulty in playing the part you have asked me to do: indeed, for someone as insightful and encouraging as you are, I could do no less. You are truly a remarkable woman”.

“Do you know who I am?” Yolanda asked.

For further reading: 1 Kings 4:22; Ecclesiastes 1:2, 2:24-26; Romans 7:14-25; 8; 10:8-10; Genesis 37-50; Luke 6:38; 2 Corinthians 9:6-7; Malachi 3:10

## **Of Such Is the Kingdom of God**

“Hey you – you in the gray suit!”

I continued walking. I knew they must be calling me but I always disliked it when people shouted.

“Excuse me, sir, but could you help me out a minute?”

That was better, I thought, far more polite altogether.

Being in an expansive mood after a particularly good day, I inquired how I might help the stranger who confronted me.

“We’re auditioning for a live reality show and the singers are appalling, absolutely appalling. I just don’t know what the screeners have been doing putting the candidates forward. I said I could do a better job myself with the first person I met on the street. “No, you couldn’t”, they said. “Yes, I could”, I remonstrated. It became a real shouting match. “So here I am. Will you help me out?”

Now it just so happens I really enjoy singing, although nowadays it is only for my own pleasure, especially when making a joyful noise unto the Lord. I had taken a few community education classes a few years ago, stopping only when a change of job took me too far away to continue. Then I had joined the choir at the church I attended but after a while I no longer felt comfortable there so I left. Suddenly, however, I had the totally unexpected opportunity to sing in public and the idea appealed to me immensely. It would be a far cry from the solos my classmates and I had sung to our families at our end of class concerts.

“Sing whatever you like,” continued my host, “just do your very best for me so that I’m proved right and my fellow judges are forced to eat humble pie.” I can remember thinking even then that that was hardly the most Christian of attitudes to adopt.

We were by now in the television studio before a live audience and I felt like the monarch of all I surveyed.

Not long before I had heard a popular song for which I changed some of the words to glorify our Father in heaven. What a priceless opportunity to share my faith in song before who knew how large an audience across the airways and on the small screen.

Well, you will have heard of beginner’s luck and perhaps recall that latent is talent with a slightly different spelling. Without waiting a moment longer, I launched myself into song and according to the media next day, a star was born. I couldn’t believe it, but my host must have done because he offered me a recording contract right there and then on that live television show. I thanked him profusely, said I’d think about it and let him know.

“What is there to think about, Zachary?” he stammered.

I told him that, while I enjoyed singing, my real passion was writing ultra short, fictional but biblically based stories in homage to my God and King.

My host was taken aback, so I promptly filled the void by explaining I was on a mission to spread the Good – the wonderful – News about the Lord Jesus Christ. In my view, the world was badly in need of a savior and only He could fill that role, as He had already done for centuries for those who believed on His name. I needed to be sure through earnest prayer that a recording contract would be in furtherance of God’s will for my life and not a distraction from what I liked to call my writing ministry.

It was as if what I said that evening touched a chord in the hearts and minds of countless numbers of people. Calls to the TV station and messages on their web site that night and long, long afterwards spoke of a hunger for a public return of God in their lives after years in which we had turned our backs on Him. Where we had been told for years we couldn't bring prayer books to school – though we could bring guns - now we wanted His protection. Where we had been told that Christmas could not be celebrated, now we wanted His blessing. And so the calls continued.

I was privileged to receive many offers to publish and film my stories, including one from a graduate Christian University. They told me they knew they couldn't match the offers I had received from the secular world but they hoped I would find it within me to honor their mission which was beyond price. The figure they mentioned was still higher than I thought it would be, even allowing for the ten per cent they naturally expected I would return to the Lord in some way.

It was the certainty they would honor my own mission above any other institution that had approached me that told me immediately theirs was the offer I would accept. Only I would give back to the Lord, not ten per cent, but ninety per cent. I did not seek to profit from doing the will of God. That money could be used, according to the university's most recent newsletter, to build an international conference center right here on campus from which the Good – the wonderful – News about the Lord Jesus Christ could be proclaimed to all nations.

And the remaining ten per cent? As I looked out the window at the setting sun, I was reminded of the little beggar boy's response when asked by Enrico Caruso what he

would have left if the great tenor did not give him the penny for which he had asked. “I would still have the sun”, came the cheerful reply.

I would use the remaining ten per cent to establish an academy for the purpose of training people to become singing teachers, that they might impart their talents to impoverished children and young people the world over. Penniless they might be, but with the warmth of the sun at their backs, and the joy of singing in their hearts, they would grow steadily in the knowledge that of such is the Kingdom of Heaven.

For further reading: Psalms 100:1, 98:4; Philippians 1:6, 4:6; Psalms 73:24; John 14:13; Proverbs 16:9, 16:3; Psalms 32:8; Philippians 1:6; Matthew 25:40; Psalms 41:1; Matthew 19:14