

So As By Fire

According to the grace of God which was given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building on it. But each man must be careful how he builds on it. For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work. If any man's work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as by fire.

1 Corinthians 3:10-15

Beginning Words

Beware, dear friend, and be warned: This is a book of tear and flame, a fiction tale of a truer reality. Enter into it, if you will, for the shadow of its mystery is more than words. Come in, I pray, and may you gaze at the unseen reality beyond the pages, for you, like all, stand at the crossway of a dark forest with two paths before you. Which will you take?

Let him who reads also understand.

So As By Fire

“Then I saw a great white throne and One seated on it. Earth and Heaven fled from His presence, and no place was found for them. I also saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life, and the dead were judged according to their works by what was written in the books.

“Then the sea gave up its dead, and Death and Hades gave up their dead; all were judged according to their works. Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. And anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.”

Revelation 20:11-15

Note to the Reader

The following is a fiction story and not a theological work and should be accepted as nothing more than a fiction story with the purpose of drawing believers into a deeper concern for eternal matters and for encouraging Christians to become eternally-minded in the way we live our lives and the witness we share with others.

...It seemed like a kind voice and was almost as soft as a whisper.

“Please tell me,” it said.

This book is dedicated to all those who need to be told.

Chapter 1 A Dark Tale

I screamed but my ears heard nothing. I cried but my tears burned dry. I writhed in pain as a man baptized within a pit of hot embers, blanketed only by the boiling oil of Adam's sin. My heart exploded. My lungs drown in the fury of liquid fire and my chest became as a furnace, cooked beyond boiling and baked beyond measure. Oh, how my body convulsed. Skin, muscle, bone—they all melted as my life died but my existence remained. Again I screamed, the tremor of which shook to the soles of my feet, but no sound came save a high-toned squeal which was quickly swallowed by the chorus of suffering sinners surrounding me.

Oh! The dread of that moment, the pain I felt that no man has ever felt on the face of this kind world. No image of horror; no concept of torture; no reasonings of pain; no nightmare of any grade throughout all time and beyond could conceive such sufferings, such hellish lamentations, such death. Ah! The dark thought of that dark country causes me now to tremble from fright such that my memory bathes me still with sweat. And the death! Oh, that death here were the end, but it is not so. It is not so! There exists, beyond the passage of this life, a hellish second death for all those who are unprepared. Take warning! Take warning, I beg you, for I have seen the mouth of Hell and it is ready, even now, to swallow in darkness all those whose souls are not ready.

Ha! What is death here—it is nothing, I tell you. *Death* in this world is but a child's toy, a play-thing in comparison to the death that follows. For death here is not death at all, and our daily sufferings—the people in that place, if you could still call them such, beg for these tribulations. If only they could return and suffer the worst this world can offer, then for the short breath of a life, they could have relief from their eternal agony.

Here! Here! A moment, please, I beg you, for the memories are too much for me. Allow that I may catch my breath. Don't leave me, I pray you, for I have a tale to tell. You must hear it. You must. Hear it now and hear it well or my freakish nightmares may become your eternal abode, into the death that never dies. Oh! For the sake of your souls, please hear my words.

Yes, and forgive me now for my trembling hands, and forgive me if I weep or fall into sudden convulsions, for to give you this story is to relive it, and although I have told the tale a hundred times, if not more, each new telling brings with it the full recompense of the experience. And I beg your pardon if I should falter in speech or groan a sad sound, for it is difficult, very difficult. How can I undertake the chore of describing the indescribable? Can a blind man fathom color? Then how shall I paint for you a picture of the reality I have seen with such dark shades that not even imagination can comprehend? I vow to you, though, that I shall hide nothing so far as it is within me to express it, for the sights I have beheld, no man should see. The horrors I have viewed with my own eyes I give to you now, though they are hard and come in such a fashion that surely the poet Dante himself would shiver a chill in his cold grave. For the Hell I have visited makes the people of his *Inferno* appear as children of ignorance or as puppets in a paradise. Oh, how I shudder to think of it. Here, however, is my tale. Listen to its warning, I beg you.

Chapter 2 The Easter Sermon

It happened long ago, nearly twenty-five years, though I remember it as it were yesterday. Yes, I remember sitting in church that crisp Spring morning, four pews from the back on the left-hand side, my accustomed place. I had visited that cushion for nearly a decade, had sat upon it, had fidgeted upon it, had even napped upon it during the duller moments of the minister's mutterings. Or perhaps, as I now recall, those were the duller moments of my own dusty relationship with Christ. Either way I visited my spot at least once a week and generally attended the special meetings. At each I would mumble an "Amen" or two and perhaps even a rare "Hallelujah," but the nodding of my head was from contented slumber rather than heart-felt agreement. For years I was unmoved, at no one's fault but my own. I believe that the Lord Himself could have stood behind that pulpit and still my eyelids would have grown heavy with tiredness and still my mind would have wandered upon the trails of a thousand distractions. Oh, I thought of lunch. I thought of work. I thought of home, but rarely, even in church, did I think of eternity. I recall pondering my childhood as I sat upon that cushy pew, and I made mental notes of a dozen more urgent matters than sitting and listening. I gave my attention to the wind and to anything that passed my mind just so I could pass the time. How could I have been so foolish? Like a blind beggar I snipped crumbs from the floor of eternity rather than feasting upon the galleys set before me.

Yes, I had lost my love for Christ. I confess this to you. No wonder my weekly hour of church attendance had become a religious ritual, a dutious chore rather than a dynamic encounter with the living Lord.

Now, before I continue, I shall have you know that I am a Christian, saved, so as by fire, saved as a child and redeemed from the death that my eyes have since beheld. And I praise God for that great salvation! And praise Him that the breath of Christ abides in my body and that the wrath of Hell shall never steal it from me.

As I was saying, I was a very content Christian. I lived my life, I worked my job, and I attended church, but I did not mix the three. My life I lived and I lived it as I pleased. My job stayed at work and my Lord stayed at church. I was a lukewarm believer with no passion, no zeal, no burden for the lost or longing for God's presence. I was casual and comfortable—What a fool I was!

Now, please understand, I was a good man, and no great sins had I committed, but Christ was always distant to me, not that He was far away, for I know now that He abides closer to me than my own breath, but I was far from Him. It was in such a spiritual state that I entered the church building that Easter day, the first day of my Spring vacation, over two decades past, and took my seat four pews from the back on the left-hand side.

“Happy Easter, ladies and gentlemen,” the minister proclaimed as if the holiday began at his pronouncement. “We have come here today to celebrate the salvation of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and to give thanks for his death, burial, and great resurrection.”

The words were grand, but looking upon the faces of the people who surrounded me I noticed that nobody was moved. Nobody stirred. Nobody even smiled. Had they come to celebrate? Why were they here? Then, as suddenly as I began to condemn them for their lack of religiosity, something nudged me from within: Why was I here?

I had always attended church on Easter. My mother raised me that way, but for the first time in a long time something inside me began to grow in weight. If it had been a tumor, I could not have felt worse, for with each sentence of the minister, it grew in weight and volume, until at last I found myself gripping the edge of the pew to prevent myself from slumping to the ground or perhaps even sliding to the brink of Hell itself.

“Just as man is destined to die once,” the minister read from Hebrews 9:27, “and after that to face judgment.”

“Why,” I wondered to myself, “would he make an Easter sermon of this? Easter was supposed to be a happy day, not a day for talking about sin and judgment.”

He continued. “We have spoken of Christ’s resurrection from the dead, but another resurrection is yet to come. When you die, and yes, it may be today, you will be raised either to life or to death. Either to Heaven forever or to Hell for eternity. The choice is yours, but hear me well, Sunday-morning Christian, church attendance does not merit favor with God. Good works do not buy a home in Glory. There is one way to Heaven and that way is Christ—*only Christ*.”

His words seared my heart with conviction and fright. I swallowed hard as I continued to listen and my knuckles grew white with fear at the pronouncement of each word.

“Heaven is real. Hell is real. They’re as real as the pew on which you’re sitting, and you—*yes, you*,” he said with a wave of his long finger, “are going to one place or the other. There is no middle road. Today is the day of salvation. It’s time to come to Christ, not with our mouths, but with our hearts. It’s time to tell others about the Lord because your friends and loved ones will spend eternity in one of two places. Yes, you know them: Heaven or Hell. And consider this: The most some of you have ever done for the Lord is to come to church and to sit on your pew. Well, it’s time to get off our seats and go into the streets to storm the gates of Hell. Jesus Christ rose from the grave, but many Christians today can’t even rise from their beds to go to church once a week! Let alone to live for Him or to speak of Him to a lost world. What have we become? When will we rise as the Bride of Christ, pure and holy, and leave behind our dead and sleeping complacency?”

His words shot from my ears to my soul like a gong resounding in the depths of a deep, dark palace. I was saved. I knew I was saved, but he was right: I had never brought

anyone to the Lord. Sure, I had heard sermons on witnessing and evangelism, but I had never “felt led” to tell anyone about Christ. At least, that had been my excuse.

“Don’t wait to feel led,” the minister continued to my surprise. “Do you feel led to breathe? Of course not, breathing comes natural. In the same way, witnessing is natural for those who know and love God. You don’t feel led, you say? Hell screams with the excuse that you ‘just weren’t led!’”

My mouth dried, my thoughts dimmed and I sat as a dead man. I don’t remember anything else the preacher said that day, but I remember the terror I felt inside. The weight, the tumor or whatever it was, had settled me so hard that when we stood to sing, the fullness of my strength was barely enough to raise my body from the pew, and even upon standing my knees quaked with such a fierce fury that I feared I would fall to the floor.

I closed my eyes to pray and though I don’t remember sitting, I remember the cold touch of the pew in front of me as I laid my forehead upon it. The palms of my hands were sweaty and I could smell wood and pine and other fresh scents. Perhaps it was my imagination, but for a moment I felt as if I was some place other than the church.

“Dear Heavenly Father,” I stuttered in such a religious tone that the Lord must have laughed at the hearing of it, “I don’t know what to say to Thou—uh, to Thee—to You. I don’t know any fancy prayers so I’ll just say what’s on my heart. I have been wrong. For so many years I have sat on this pew and done nothing. I would like to do something now, but I don’t know what. The preacher says it’s natural, but it doesn’t feel very natural. Um, Lord, I don’t understand. My mother always said you were a God of love, but if you are a God of love, how could you create a place like Hell. Or is Hell really even real? It doesn’t seem real, but...oh, well. Lord, help me, please. Help me to understand.”

I left the church that day with a heavy heart. I knew a voice had spoken to my soul, but for so long I had made myself deaf that I barely knew what to make of it. The

afternoon passed quickly and the sky darkened without realization. Perhaps my eyes had been closed, or perhaps the change had been so gradual that I didn't even realize it was taking place. However it came, it came and in the darkness I knelt down at the side of my bed.

“Dear Father,” I prayed again, “I'm so upset. My life has no meaning. I've been living for nothing and I have nothing to give you. Oh, Lord, I'm so sorry. Please motivate me to live for you.”

I paused and considered all the words I had heard that day. “Heaven is real,” the preacher had said. I believed him and I thought of the millions who already walked the streets of gold, who could see even now the crystal sea and the glory of God Himself. How wonderful it must be. But what about Hell? Was Hell also real? Heaven was easy to believe in. What person couldn't picture a paradise with no pain, no tears, no death, where the only light is that of the Lord? But Hell...an eternal death without the ability to be released from death. It was a hard matter to consider, but consider it I did, and I further considered the untold souls who had already passed that torturous way.

“Could there be,” I wondered aloud, “scores of people this very moment already burning in the Lake of Fire?”

I bowed my head with the weight of the thought.

“Lord,” I prayed with simple words that come only from a heart of pure intentions, “there are many things that I don't understand about You, but after today I want to understand. Could I-I,” I paused and swallowed though my mouth was dry. I took a deep breath and continued, “Could I see Hell? Could I see it just so I can understand it that I might forever more be persuaded to stop people from going there?”

I abruptly halted my prayer. Perhaps it was a foolish prayer, I thought, but mother had always told me to talk to God like a friend. Even now I can recall her saying, “You have not because you ask not.” Either way I felt a relief and the heaviness that had previously loomed above me seemed to scatter with the onslaught of the night. Soon the former

heaviness of the room was replaced by the new heaviness of my eyelids. I yawned long and wide and did not lay upon my bed for more than five full minutes before I slipped into a deep, deep slumber.

Chapter 3

The Gate

Suddenly, my eyes were open but I was still asleep. Or was I? The room was dark and brimmed with a shadow so glum that to this day I have never again seen its like. From floor to rafters the room flooded with despair and dread. Then, to my disconcerted surprise and deep horror, I began to move. Something was pulling me, reeling me in like a fish on a hook. I fought against it, but my hands could catch nothing as if nothing else existed. Across the carpet of my bedroom I slid and to the door. I reached for its frame, but to my shock, to my horror, to my utmost astonishment, my hands passed through without touch or feeling. I closed my eyes and begged for help and when they opened again my house had vanished. All was black, pitch-black, without so much as a stream of light or a shadow from its reflection. My eyes failed me in the darkness. I couldn't even see my own body and yet I was falling. Down, down I shot like an Autumn leaf bidding farewell to its branch and to the last light of its life. Down, down I spun, petrified and speechless, until at last my body slid to a slow stop.

Where was I? I could not see. Was I blind? All was dark and I saw nothing until I turned. Then to my deep surprise I beheld two magnificent figures of indescribable proportions. My jaw gaped at the sight and I blinked for disbelief. But there they were, as real as the light of the sun: Two large, luminous beings. Even though they were far-off and a great space separated us, the fear and awe they stirred in my soul struck me like a bolt from the blue. I floundered for a moment, nearly stumbling to my knees because my body was shivering with fright.

Quickly I regained my composure, though my body still shook, and heaved a deep breath. What could be done, except to approach these creatures? No where to run. No

where to hide. So being the only creatures in sight, for they were the only thing in sight except the deep mist behind them, I walked forward. I walked, though I must confess, with much dread and each step heaped upon my shoulders a lifetime of terror. My stomach cringed and I feared that at any moment I might turn and run with madness into the dark never to be seen or heard from again. The insanity was too much for me, but somehow my feet moved steadily forward. One step and then another. Something inside drew me, pulled me, toward the creatures. Could I have resisted? To this day I know not the answer.

As I approached I realized who these creatures were. They were angels. They had to be, but they stood stock-still and did not even bat an eye at my coming. Each held a sword, unlike any sword ever fashioned by the hand of man. Back and forth these weapons flashed to and fro to guard the way, and behind them rose a gate of immense proportions. Perhaps these creatures were like the cherubim God had stationed at the east side of the Garden of Eden after He had expelled Adam and Eve for their sin. But whether these creatures guarded the way in, so as to keep people out, or whether they guarded the way out, so as to keep people in, I did not know, nor did I dare ask.

I trembled as I approached the pair. My voice left me, that had I wished to speak anything, though I cannot in all imagination see why I would be inclined to do so, my words could have found no voice with which to utter it. My heart failed me. Never before had I felt such dread, such anticipation, but for some reason I continued to walk toward the gate. The sight of it was incredible, beyond anything the mind of man has ever built. Brick upon brick, if it could be likened to such, it rose as high as sight and disappeared into a type of a mist upon either side. This place was dark and gloomy, like a Giant's dungeon from some medieval tale. The only light here came from the swords and from the angels themselves and even that light took an eerie appearance before such a grand fortress.

Slowly and cautiously I stepped within arms-reach of the two beings, and though I half-expected them to cut me down with a quick flash of their flaming weapons, those holy swords suddenly ceased moving. Instead of striking me down, the angels held still their swords, in a straight fashion, upwards, as if to let me pass.

I longed to look at the faces of these beings, for each seemed to have the likeness of four faces. Oh! They were beautiful, frighteningly beautiful, and though I wish I could describe them to you, I cannot, for I merely glanced at them and a mere glance was enough to steal the breath from my lungs. During my entire stride to them and even as I stood before them, I dared not to look fully upon their beauty. Rather, I held low my head to the ground and fixed my eyes upon the darkness beneath me. For a moment I did look up, though not at their faces, mind you, for the rich splendor of their countenance would have surely been far more than my mortal body could have sustained, and the mere sight of their swords hurt my heart. Nevertheless, I looked up. Yes, I looked up to behold the door of the gate, and to my surprise it had no handle. Was this such, so that people like myself could not enter? Or so that people such as myself could not open it for others to escape? Perhaps this was not a door at all, but a decoration to a citadel from which none could enter and none could leave. I was curious, of course, to these matters, but I was also glad it had no handle, for I feared that I might have dared upon my life to open it. Yes, though strange it might seem, I confess that even as I had yearned to look upon these mysterious angels of beauty, but could not, I likewise aspired to go forward, though my body would permit me no more. Oh, how I longed to peek inside that stronghold of despair, that fortress of woe, but though I tried with all my strength, I could not muster the courage nor the means by which to glimpse the residence of such a place. And I was glad for it—in a sad sort of way.

Then, to my surprise, I beheld something that I had not yet noticed. There before me I saw a sign upon the gate, a kind of sad placard which read:

*Through me you go into the City of Grief,
Where the fire burns hot and the worm never dies.
Through me you go into the pain that is eternal,
Through me you go among people lost.*

*Justice moved my exalted Creator;
The Divine power made me,
The Supreme Wisdom, and the Primal Love.*

*Before me all created things were eternal,
And eternal I will last.
Abandon every hope, you who enter here.*

These words sent a tremor down my spine that shook to the soles of my feet. Such grand statements have been handed down through history, but I had always supposed them to be exaggerations like the promise of some fancy politician or the pompous boast of a now-dead general. Yet these words rang with truth. Every fiber of my being held firm that this was no stretch of the matter, no fancy made larger than life. This place, this plaque, this pain was real.

I panted for breath and re-read the words. They were written with such a dark coloring that if they had been written in a language foreign to my eyes, my heart still could have discerned their meaning.

“Horror upon horror,” I gasped without words. “I am at the gate of Hell!”

Terror, unlike anything I have ever known, swept upon the frame of my body like a mass of vultures pecking a dead carcass. Sensation after sensation flowed over my soul. Dread upon dread heaped high upon my heart until my knees buckled at the gate and I fell to my face. Clutching my hair in fretful agony as I rocked back and forth upon my knees, I wondered how I had come to this place. Had I died? Was this my new eternal residence? It couldn't be, I argued within myself, for I was a Christian. I knew it well. True, I had not always lived for Christ, but I had given Him my life. I had! I knew I had! How could I now be at the gate of Hell?

Reasonings left me. Imaginations fled. Concepts, ideas, dreams, longings all vanished like a shadow in the night and the darkness closed in. My chest grew tight, so tight that I choked upon my own lungs. Oh! The blistering horror that petrified my body and frightened my wits away. Oh! The heinous claws of abhorrence that silently slid their fingers around my throat. If only I could breathe. If only I could think. If only I could somehow shock myself awake from this sickening dream, this loathsome nightmare that could only be imagined by the mind of an unstable man. And yet I was just now at the gate of Hell? What of Hell itself? Ah! The thought was too much for me and my body fell suddenly into such a state of convulsions that I must have unashamedly withered and twitched at the feet of those angelic beings, though I do not remember it. In fact, my mind is quite vacant as to the rest of my experience that night, save to say that I feel I remember quite enough.

The only other thing I remember is a voice. It seemed like a kind voice and was almost as soft as a whisper. “Please tell me,” it said.

Then I opened my eyes, and when I did, I was no longer at the gate of Hell. There were no terrifying beings of angelic beauty hovering above me and I was no longer upon my knees. Instead, my room surrounded me. My bed lay snug and warm beneath me and blankets covered my body. My coverings did, however, have a strange look to them, as though one had haphazardly tossed them across me without taking the time to tuck them in or to tuck them under. They appeared to me as the coverings of a dead man, pulled up all the way, exposing only the head.

My body was bathed in sweat. My ears drummed with the pounding of my heart, and I sighed deeply with relief. It had been a dream. Praise God. It had only been a dream, and strange as it might seem, upon awakening I had never before had such great assurance of my own salvation as I did at that very moment.

I rose from my bed and stumbled through the darkness to the bathroom. There the light burned my eyes even as the swords of the cherubim had burned my heart. I looked

in the mirror. My eyes were reddened and blood-shot. My face was pale, almost deathly by comparison, and somehow my cheeks had blown inwards and had sank more than usual to the extent that they revealed my jawbones. But the most disturbing feature of all was my hair. It was blown, standing straight up upon its roots and was curiously stirred, as if by breath or by hot air.

Chapter 4 Lamentations

What could a man do after such a vision? For a while I paced. For a while I pondered, and for a while I prayed, but I dared not to go to sleep—not after such a nightmare. Instead, I prepared a cup of hot tea, snuggled down in my chair, and for the first time in years I grabbed the Bible on a day other than Sunday. The cover seemed to creak as I opened it, if that were even possible, but at least it didn't have a layer of dust. I had been faithful—that is, faithful in toting my sacred book to church once a week. Yes, it had traveled many a mile though not a single page had ever been read. In fact, I could have named a dozen television shows for the name of each Bible book I could recall without sneaking a look.

Thus, I opened it, the most neglected and the most used, or perhaps misused, book in my entire house. Immediately the tender smell of fresh pages rose to my nose as I gently pulled them apart. Not knowing much about the Bible, though I had claimed to live every jot of it, I began in the Table of Contents. Sixty-six books I counted, though I couldn't have told you a single verse from a single one had my life depended on it. At last I decided to begin reading in the New Testament. I had often heard our pastor refer to this section of the book, although I couldn't help wondering why the authors hadn't divided it into two equal parts with thirty-three books in each rather than one lop-sided section with thirty-nine and the other on the short end with only twenty-seven. Nevertheless, I began in a book titled, "The Gospel According to Matthew."

I hadn't the slightest idea who Matthew was, nor could I guess at the contents of his Gospel, so it was with great eagerness that I first began reading. Thus I began, "A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David (Although I had always thought that He

was the son of Joseph), the son of Abraham: Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, Judah the father of..." After ten verses of this I decided I had chosen the wrong book in which to begin. But, feeling now a sense of commitment, I skimmed the list, skipping names here and there until at last I came to the story of Jesus' birth.

On I read till dawn, and I was astounded. Never before had I read an entire book of the Bible, and truthfully, it was far better than I had ever expected. The story of Jesus. Truly I had picked the perfect book to read first. Never before had I understood the life of Christ, but now everything seemed transparent with a new clarity. For the first time in my life I felt that I actually *knew* Jesus. For a time I pondered this new reality into which I had apparently stepped and wondered what kind of impact it would have on my life, if any.

Soon my eyes grew as tired as my body and I yawned with pleasure. The thoughts of Hell seemed distant to me now, and since I had completed my reading and had hopefully put my mind at ease from those horrid imaginations, I decided to chance my way again into the bedroom.

By this time the sun shone brightly through my windows, and, it being my Spring vacation, I decided to indulge myself in a day of uninterrupted sleep. Sleep, that is, without the nightmares. Daylight had come and surely the dreams had passed. A new type of perfect peace attended my heart as I slipped beneath my covers and I gave myself over to weariness.

Hours passed and when I awoke the afternoon had come. I was hungry and denied myself no pleasure in stuffing myself with rich foods. After all, this was my vacation and what better way to spend it than by indulging myself in whatever I wished.

For a while I watched television, but I soon lost my taste for that and reached for the Bible instead. I turned to a book titled, "The Gospel According to Mark."

“This sounds interesting,” I thought to myself but had not read a chapter before I realized that this was the story of Jesus—*again*. How odd, I thought, and actually considered the idea that perhaps every book in the Bible was a different telling of the same story. I read it anyway. After all, reading the same story twice couldn’t hurt since I had only read it once in my entire life, and I was soon entranced again by the acts of Christ.

After reading Mark, I sat back in my chair and prayed.

“Lord,” I said within my head, “this has been a strange day. I never knew how pleasant it could be to read your Word, but I still have so many questions. That dream last night really bothered me. Was it just a dream or does a place like that really exist? And...I was...I was...I was wondering if...”

I yawned. Then a deep sleep came upon me and my body reclined into a peaceful posture. A distant snore rattled in my ears. Then again it came with a choked breath that shook me awake. With eyes half-opened, I stood from my chair and though I don’t remember walking the hallway, I do, however, recall laying back upon my bed. Its softness swallowed me and I quickly gave way to a hefty slumber, so deep that my snorings fell silent.

Suddenly, the sleep into which I had fallen was shaken by a heavy thunder. The sound boomed in my ears as if a Niagara of waters had exploded atop me. The crack rang with such a fury that one could fancy someone had ripped back the sky from the earth. The world shook and the clatter came in such ear-deafening, heart-quaking raps so that grown men would surely pull covers and blankets whole over their heads.

I opened my eyes and though I slept, I was fully awake and found myself in a fantasy which was much more than a dream. Startled, as one awakened by a force, and having risen, I glanced around and looked intently with weary eyes to discover where I was. In truth, I found myself upon a high wall. Yes, it was the wall I had seen the previous night, the one that had reached to the extent of my sight. Now I was upon its top. Surely

somewhere far below me stood the two angelic beings at the gate with the sign. Was this the wall of a city? And yet no city existed. Instead, as I peered down from the height of my placement, I found myself upon the brink of an abyss of unmeasurable depth. It was so dark, deep, and cloudy that in looking towards the bottom, I could discern nothing.

Hot winds rushed upwards from the pit like fearful, heaving sighs, and brushed past my face which was immediately wetted by sweat. The heat was so intense that I feared I would swoon and unwittingly cast myself into the deep hole. Yet, I made my stand firm lest I should fall and gripped the stone railment before me till my knuckles grew white.

The air here was thick, and breathing was hard. My nose and lungs burned as faint whispers of sulfur and gas reached up to me. I coughed and sputtered, gagging from the whiff, but upon a second breath my discomfort entirely left me and I breathed easily.

Here, so far as I could tell by listening, there was no lament, but only sighs which made the eternal air tremble.

I turned and walked upon a wide path. Gazing steadily at the pit, I continued on along the wall until I encountered a stairway, and sensing no apprehension, I descended it. Down, down I went. Down, down I descended. Down I went, I say, until at last I stood upon a battlement. The sighs above now gained a new and spine-chilling clarity. The air fumed about me with crackles and snaps. From here the city took on a new and gruesome outlook. There before my eyes, the pit no longer held the appearance of a deep, black, hot hole, but now appeared before me as an ocean. Like a sea of black waves it rippled before me as far as sight could perceive. In the distance, through the mist and the rising fumes, I fancied I could see a horizon, though no light shone upon it. And waves—such black waves—rippled before me, and unlike the waves of water that flow to and fro, these waves reached for the heights like drowning victims gasping for one last breath. With darkened flames this lake roared with the wrath of an Almighty God. This was the Lake of Fire. Never in my imagination had I grasped the idea that the hottest fire is not yellow, nor blue, but the hottest fire is a black fire. So hot are these flames that our atmosphere

will not even permit their appearance and yet they consume with the fervent heat of millions of degrees the dark spots of our own celestial sun.

My jaw gaped wide in astonishment. Such horror for my mind was beyond comprehension, and perhaps the sight of such a stunning fire had shocked me beyond hearing, for to this point I had heard nothing but a lowly moan. Now, to my deep surprise and gruesome disgust came a noise so contemptuous, so odious, so loathsome that the insanity of man cannot even begin to imagine its like. For in this place sighs, lamentations, and deep wailings resounded through the starless air, so that at first I began to weep. Diverse tongues, horrible languages, words of pain, accents of rage, voices loud and hoarse, and the sounds of blows made a tumult which moved forever in that air unchanged by time, as sand eddies in a whirlwind. My blood ran cold from the freakish eruptions. Such regret, such villainy, such nauseating cries came to my hearing that I feared I would vomit and faint upon the battlement. Better to say atrocious, or ghoulish, or deplorable, or abhorrent, or abominable than to describe the sickened music of that awful, that horrible, that dreadful song of woe. It was pitiable and yet revolting. Pathetic yet harrowing. A sad lament that filled me both with rage and sorrow.

Ah! My head girt with terror. My heart thumped like the beating of a blacksmith upon his anvil. My body swam in sweat as I closed my eyes and soaked in the despair. Their woes throbbed within my head, and then all became silent.

Upon opening my eyes, the horrors were gone. Again, as the previous night, I found myself upon my bed, wetted with sweat and taunted with gentle tremors that ran the full length of my body. I shivered cold from those hot thoughts and shook myself again to reality, but like the previous nightmare, this dream gave me no fear of Hell. As I laid beneath the covers, I was not afraid to move, nor was I afraid to remain in the dark. I didn't dash for the bathroom to behold my own appearance and assure myself that all was well. Instead, I became deeply inquisitive. I had been given a great gift, if not a terrifying one, but a gift nonetheless. How many others could boast that they had seen the Lake of

Fire? But why? Why was I allowed this mystery? I had asked for it—true. But had I really wanted an answer? Either way, I knew now that life was more than breathing and existing. It was more than having fun, eating good food, and making money. Life is about eternity, and the brief span of time that we call life is only preparation for the eternity that follows.

“Dear Lord,” I prayed, realizing that I had prayed more in the last two days than I had in the previous two months. “Lord, I want to know more. I know now that Hell is real, but why? Why have you shown it to me? You don’t have to give me another dream, but please answer my question.”

I don’t remember falling back to sleep. Perhaps I prayed myself to sleep, and if I had I hoped that God wasn’t offended. I know now that He is not, no more than a loving father would be angered if his child fell asleep in his arms, but I did not have that understanding then. When I awoke, however, I was surprised. The night had passed and the day had dawned and without another dream.

“Perhaps it’s all over,” I thought as I crawled out of bed.

I must admit that I was both perplexed and conflicted. Each dream had been terrifying, even to the extent that I later checked my hair for hints of gray, but as heart-shocking as they might be, each dream also impressed me with a desire for yet another. I sensed that this mission—if such a name might be applied—had only just begun, and though I longed for the next vision, I also abhorred its coming. Each of the dreams had taken me a step closer to Hell and I dared not to think how much further I might yet venture.

With these thoughts aside, however, I turned my waking attention again to Bible. After all, dawn had come and nothing else so possessed my heart as the reading of God’s Word. Everything seemed to pale against its glimmer. Fun, enjoyment, happiness—activities that once held a strong emotional appeal for me became dull when compared to the truth and reality of the book I now held in my hands. Food that had once brought

great delight became bland in comparison. Perhaps I had changed after all. I didn't know and at the time I didn't care. The future became a matter of hope and faith in which I could rest rather than a mark for which I must struggle, and in that rest I was content. Yes, indeed, I was content to sit upon my chair, to prop up my feet and lose myself in the best book of all.

I read the Gospel of Luke and was struck by the likenesses and differences of it in comparison to Matthew and Mark. I suddenly felt like I was looking at an imaginary diamond, for three people could describe the same jewel from three different angles and their descriptions would all be correct and would each reveal a fresh perspective. Such was my examination of these three books, but the fourth! Oh, how I loved the Gospel of John. Even now many times I wish I could return and again behold it fresh and anew as I did that day. It was the life of Christ *again*, but with such simplicity and splendor.

After John I read the book of Acts and then part of Romans. What a book Romans was! Oh, how grand yet simple. It was like a schoolmaster dishing out great truths one spoon-full at a time and I had the most peculiar sensation that if salvation were an ocean I had just drank my first cup-full of its knowledge. One verse in particular, Romans 6:23, struck me like a stone.

For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Death. I had seen the house of real death, that hellish second death that stands in opposition to God's great eternity. Yes, I had beheld that city of woe and that which we call death here would never again have meaning for me.

For the wages of sin is death...

I read those words again and again until my eyes blurred and each new reading dug deeper in my soul: People alive today could die tomorrow with no hope of Heaven. I bowed my head and wept.

Chapter 5

Ponderings

As noon approached on that fine Spring Tuesday over two decades past, I decided that I had hidden in my house too long. The refrigerator was empty, as was my stomach, so I quickly scribbled a list of groceries, stuffed it in my pocket, dotted a hat on my head, and locked the door behind me. Like the clang of two trash cans, the car door shut and I started the engine just as I had a thousand times before. Every action was habit. Every thought was familiar and I proceeded without interruption as I always had. Out of the driveway and onto the street I steered and as I did I mentally added an item or two to my grocery list. Thoughts of eternity were far from me then, as though I had left them at my house, locked behind that door or shoved deep within the cover of my Bible like some long-forgotten church bulletin. Heaven and Hell didn't seem real here—at least, not in the real world. Or was this the real world? I wasn't sure anymore.

I eased my breaks at the stop light and as I did I glanced at the driver opposite me. She was a young lady with short, dark hair, not pretty by any means, but simple, plain, and ordinary. A child sat next to her. Apparently the mother was not very pleased with something the little boy had done. She scowled as she leaned over him. Her lips curled and moved but I heard no words. Then she reached for something, perhaps a spilled drink, but I couldn't see. She looked so...so unhappy. Then as sudden as a shock of lightning, a thought struck me: Would this lady go to Heaven or would she join the millions already in Hell?

I froze, and though I looked at her, I saw more than just her and her car. I felt as if I could already see dozens of black flames leaping up around her. I shutter even now to think of it.

Then my eyes crept to the child. He was about eight years old, with short, uncombed hair. In truth, he was just as plain as his mother, but unlike her he looked innocent. Then he smiled and his face lit with the fullness of youth in all its simple pleasures. Someday this child would grow up and someday he would die. Then what? Where would he go?

Honk! I shook myself to reality to realize that the light had turned green and the driver behind me was growing increasingly impatient. He honked again as I sped forward and then passed me with an irritated glance. He looked so disturbed and his eyes seemed dead of life. Perhaps he was in a hurry. Perhaps he was having a bad day. Perhaps, I thought, he didn't have Christ.

"Don't follow me," his bumper sticker read, "I don't know where I'm going either."

Perhaps he didn't know where he was going. Perhaps he *was* lost—lost spiritually, I thought as I watched him speed away. If only I could have told him about Jesus.

It was then that I realized that I had changed. Never in my life had I desired to tell anyone about Christ, but now everyone I saw filled me with the desire. Were they saved? Were they lost? They had to be one or the other, but which? And what if they never came to Christ? What if no one told them? What if *I* never told them? But how could I tell them all and what would I say?

My entire experience at the store pounded me with these questions. I watched the people. They came and went. Some were happy. Some looked sad. Others passed me as if I didn't even exist. They were all different. Some were thin. Some were fat. Some were tall. Others were short. Different eye colors. Different hair colors. Different skin colors. They were all different, but they were all alike because each of them was on a road—either to Heaven or to Hell. And someday every one of them would die and they would find themselves in eternity.

The thoughts were almost too much for me. I felt as if I was suddenly separated from time, as if I was seeing the world through new eyes—new eyes that made my stomach roll. So many people and most of them had probably never been told about Jesus.

I left the store that day burdened and sorrowful, and as I drove home, every car and every person I passed deepened my feelings of urgency. These people *had* to know about Christ. Someone had to tell them. How could churches and pastors be so silent? How could they just wade through life as if it didn't matter? How could they...then I paused. How could I judge others and exempt myself? I too had been silent for so many years. I wondered how many opportunities I had missed and how many souls could have come to Christ if I had lived what I claimed to believe.

After parking my car and unloading the groceries, I sat on my porch and watched the sun fade into darkness. Though I hadn't eaten, I was no longer hungry. Food seemed tasteless to me and I wanted nothing of it. I just wanted to sit and think and pray, and so I did. The sunset was beautiful with tints of yellow and pink and even purple. It was the prettiest sight I had seen in a long time and it made me wonder what Heaven must be like. After all, I had seen Hell. There was no beauty there—surely Heaven must be the exact opposite.

At last I strolled into the house, picked up my Bible and read, and on I read until my eyes grew tired. The words here seemed to steal away the burdens of the day. Or perhaps, rather than taking them away, the Scriptures clarified them.

“No, we speak of God’s secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. However, as it is written: ‘No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him’” (I Corinthians 2:7-9).

Heaven, I thought. No eye has seen; no ear has heard; neither has it even entered into the mind of man the great things that God has in store for us who believe. Oh, that I could see Heaven instead of Hell.

Then another verse came to mind. I had read it the night before. Where was it? Oh, yes, there it was, in Romans chapter nine. I read it again.

“I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh”
(Romans 9:1-3).

This man, though I did not know at the time that it was the Apostle Paul, would be willing to give up Heaven for himself if only others would be saved. Truly his burden for the lost far surpassed mine, but I could understand it. I could understand his...his passion, his desire, his longing for people to come to the Lord.

I pondered these words the rest of the evening and when at last I became tired, I closed the Bible and reclined back in my chair. I could feel sleep creeping over my body, and though my body rested, my mind raced with excitement, for somewhere in the depths of my soul I could already hear a beckoning voice. I would dream again. I knew I would. Then my eyes closed and my thoughts surrendered to slumber.

Chapter 6 The Weeping

Suddenly, though I had expected it, I stood upon the same battlement from which I had previously awakened. Above me loomed the stairwell down which I had descended. Below me loomed the Lake of Fire. Its dark flames leapt high into the dark expanse and the clouded vapors which swirled before me. The rush of sulfur was nauseating, but as with the previous time, after one gulp my lungs eased and my breathing no longer burned. There was something supernatural about this, as if I was allowed only one breath of the death that dwelt here. It was not so, I knew, with the inhabitants of this place. There was no growing “used to” anything here and I supposed that this agony continually struck with blows of pain as strong and fresh as the first moment they arrived.

The laments here hounded my ears with torturous cries that far exceeded the previous dream. Woe and gasp. Howl and holler. Grunt and groan. Every imaginable sound of grief and torment strung together in this orchestration to present a symphony of pain—never-ending, never-pausing, never a moment’s release or a moment’s pardon, for this prison had no parole. Its inmates screamed. They shrieked. They roared with such wailings that I surely would have died at the racket had not the hand of the Almighty sustained me.

Then the tearful sea produced a blast which flashed forth a crimson light. A torrent of sulfurous gas exploded before me and all my senses were conquered. For a moment I stood deaf and blind, without feeling or thought. As the haze lifted another horrid flame leapt high into the sky, but rather than a burst of light, this tongue of darkness stole the light away and all was black.

I trembled as I stood upon that ledge, staring into the darkness of the abyss, the hot air coursing about me like a wild tornado, and though I had no strength I moved my shaking knees to yet another stairwell. Down I descended. With each step, the sighs that had turned into the wails above now became a terrible tapestry of individual voices. Some screamed for relief. Others begged for mercy. Still another, a shrill female voice, cried out for her children, that they might be spared the agony of this existence.

Ah! The regret! The regret! My legs grew limp and I stumbled down the passage.

“Water! Please! A drop of water!”

“I—I—I—I want to go back! P-l-e-a-s-e, j-u-s-t l-e-t m-e g-o b-a-c-k!”

Oh! The pain of their screams haunts me even now for I can still hear their pleas. Even now their cries come to my mind for I know that they are still there in that dungeon of doom. Ah, how they cried! They wailed without the hope of anyone hearing. They wailed without the hope of death or relief, and in that instant I could feel their complete loss. For the first time I understood the total depravation of being cut off from everyone and everything. Some of them there had taught others the wrong way. They had led them straight to the pit and laments for forgiveness were ever upon their lips. Others had come to the threshold of Heaven only to be cast away because they had chosen to eat upon their sin even as Eve ate upon the fruit and now that they had eaten their fill, sin’s child, death, ate upon them. Still others had been church members and even good people who never saw the need for Christ in their lives and only at the end did they realize the truth—only after their eternity was sealed and their fate could no longer be altered. Bad choices. Fear. Peer pressure. Suicide to escape a tormented life only to find a much more horribly tormented eternity. Hell screamed with these cries.

Their pleas were deafening and I pressed my hands upon my ears to plug my soul from their pain. For a moment I experience a muted relief but as their cries muffled, another voice grew in volume, though it was still as quiet as a whisper. It was a woman’s voice that echoed in my head, “Please tell me,” she said softly. She didn’t seem

anguished or tortured. “Please tell me,” it sounded again, though more distant and then became swallowed by the torment before me as I heaved a deep breath, released the grip on my head and pressed forward.

“Why?! Why?!”

“I’m s-o-r-r-y! “I’m s-o, s-o s-o-r-r-y!”

“Oh God! Oh God! Why did I reject you?!”

Down I staggered like a drunken fool into a pool of despair. My back hunched as though a weight had been lashed upon it. Their words cut me like a knife and my vision was clouded either by the full tumult of smoke and gas or by the pounding within my brain. I half thought that I would go blind, deaf, and mad all in that self-same instance, but still I continued down.

“I—I—I—I want to go back! P-l-e-a-s-e, j-u-s-t l-e-t m-e g-o b-a-c-k!”

“Please tell my parents! Please! For my family!”

“Why did I listen to you! You fool! I followed you here!”

The closer I drew to the surface of Hell, the more clearly I could hear their woe and the more ghastly Hell grew appearance. The once black flames adopted a new dimension. Burning embers, yellow-hot sparks, and blue-flame snippets danced along the sea like a parade of gnats. I could see other things also. Things that looked like worms and maggots which swam in the fire. And the fire! Oh that it were just fire, but it looked more like a liquid here with flames on top. Yes, it boiled and it bubbled like a huge cauldron of living, liquid fire and above the flick of the flames loomed a cloud of immense proportions. Perhaps it was sulfur. Perhaps it was smoke, but whatever it was, it was so thick that it appeared solid. There it hung like an eternal, gloomy-yellow vulture, hovering above the carcasses of a billion lost souls, darkened, or perhaps burned on the underside by the shadow of the flame.

Ah, and all was dark. How I saw, I do not know, for I know of nothing that could have penetrated the pitch of that place. But what I saw shook me. I felt as if despair had taken physical form and his name was Hell.

“N-o-o-o-o-o-o!”

“It’s my fault! I should have known! Why didn’t I listen?!”

“I beg you! I beg you! Please don’t let my children come here! P-l-e-a-s-e!”

Oh, the horror that words fail to describe. The gloom! The gloom! I cannot give it words for it is too much for me. Let me pause. Please, I beg you, let me pause. Allow that I might catch my breath. Ah! It pains me so. I wish you could see. But I must continue. Yes, for your sake, I must continue on.

Yes, upon that infernal beach I stood, for I had finished my descent. Perhaps minutes passed. Perhaps hours, but time was as lost to me as life was lost to the people of that place. I dimly watched their pain. I clearly heard their cries. I wept. Oh, I wept and I knew that every soul before me would give all for a single tear to cool their tongues.

Then something drew me closer to the edge of this vast ocean. Yes, I walked so close that I could touch the flames though I felt no heat from them. I stretched my hand to one. Ah! I staggered back in horror for I could suddenly see hands grasping for relief, hands as black as the flames that bit at them. They reached for the sky like drowning victims hoping for a life-line, only to clutch nothing as their hope vanished like the air between their fingers.

Then, to my dread, to my terror, to my utmost contempt, a hand reached to me from the depths of the pit. It reached to me! It was as dark and damaged as any limb ever burned by fire. That this thing had once been human was beyond recognition. Surely this hand had once held the hand of a loved one. Once this hand had been a child’s, innocent and free. Once this hand had stroked someone’s face with tender care or felt their head for fever. I knew not when. I knew not where, but this hand, this person before me had been alive. It had lived. It had loved. It had felt happiness and sorrow and it had died

without Christ. Oh, but now I couldn't even discern whether it was male or female. I couldn't even tell how many fingers it stretched out, for it looked now more like a claw than a hand. It vibrated with agony and shook with the full force of suffering and separation from God. Up it reached and with it came a voice, a weak, rasping voice that cried out, "Why didn't you tell me? Why didn't you tell me?!"

"No!" I screamed, stumbling back, "No-o-o-o!"

I did not recognize the person, but whether it spoke to me or another made no difference, for I too had been unfaithful in bringing others to Christ. I turned from the sight and covered my face. In the distance I could hear the voice as it was swallowed again by the flames.

"W-h-y-?"

I had no answer. I was guilty. I stood and beat my hands upon my chest.

"Dear God, I'm sorry!"

Yes, I was saved. I was going to Heaven but I had been unwilling to invite others there with me. How could I have been so foolish?!

I slid my hands from my face which was drenched by sweat and tears, fell to my knees, and raised my voice again to Heaven. My scream joined the chorus of suffering sinners behind me and I cried, "Dear God, I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!"

The sound of my voice shook me awake and I found myself again in my living room, nestled in my chair, my Bible still on my lap. The third night of my vacation had deepened into darkness, but beyond that, I was safe and far from the torments of Hell. I knew I would never abide there, but so close were the flames to my heart that I also knew I must warn others of this danger.

"Oh, God!" I called aloud, dropping to my knees. "Oh, God, what can I do so that people won't go to Hell? Oh, God, what can I do? I'm not a smart man. I don't have any great talents. I don't speak well, so what can I do, Lord? I'll do anything, God. Please,

show me how I can warn others. How can I tell them about You? Oh, God, please teach me. Please use me.”

As I prayed a peace washed over me, not just a peace that is the absence of conflict or distress, but a peace that is the fullness of life overflowing with joy. I was suddenly filled beyond measure with the exact opposite of what I had experience in my dream. The room seemed thick with His presence, so much so that I laid flat on the floor, pressed down with the joyous weight of a glory that seemed to fill every nook and cranny of the room, and of my soul. Peace bathed my soul even as the sweat of the vision had bathed my body. I was awake, I was alive, and I was blessed. Someone had taken the time to show me the way of salvation, but I had never shown anyone else. How could I have been silent for so long? Never again, I pledged. Never again.

Chapter 7

Learning

Again I read the Bible until the day dawned. It was Wednesday and though my body should have been tired from the long night, I felt refreshed instead. I felt as though something beyond food had nourished me.

As the day grew brighter, I dressed myself and headed out the door. My steps seemed predetermined. I was drawn to church, which had never before happened, especially on a weekday.

I felt odd driving into the almost empty parking lot.

“What do these people do at the church all day long?” I wondered.

It was a thought of ignorance, as if ministry just happens on Sunday mornings, but I didn’t know any better. Part of me quite expected to walk in and find them all in the auditorium in some deep and stirring prayer meeting. But instead I saw janitors cleaning, secretaries answering phones, different staff members chatting in their offices or working on their computers. I felt very out of place. Most of them didn’t even know my name. I didn’t blame them for it. After all, never once had I come here on any day but Sunday and even then my presence had been seldom.

“Excuse me,” I mumbled to a kind-looking, young secretary. “Where can I find the pastor?”

“Do you have an appointment?”

She said this very politely, though very matter-of-factly.

“Was I supposed to have an appointment?” I thought.

“Well, no.” I said. “Is he in?”

She reached for her phone, apparently to check with him, when I heard a familiar voice behind me.

“Good morning.”

I turned to see the pastor. He seemed as jovial and animated in real life as he did on the platform. I had always supposed that it was probably part of an act, just showmanship to help him express his point, and now I reddened at my previous judgments.

“Good morning, sir,” I said. “Do you have a moment?”

“Of course,” he said without hesitation. “Come in. Come in.”

His office was very pleasant, not fancy or elaborate, but simple and clean. He offered me a cup of coffee which I gladly accepted and we chatted like old friends as I added my sugar. He asked about my job and my home. He knew my name and he even knew where I lived. He commented on the new paint job I had given my house earlier in the spring. I was impressed.

At last we sat down in two comfortable chairs. I had half expected him to sit behind his desk and suddenly to call us to business, but he just continued to chat from the chair next to me. He talked about the weather and how his dog pretended to hunt in his backyard when the seasons began changing. It was a simple conversation, the kind you might have with anyone. For a moment I even forgot that he was a minister. He seemed so human, so real. I felt very much at ease.

“So what brings you around today?” he finally asked.

I sat silent for a moment. I wanted to lay out everything that had happened in the past few days, but I couldn't. It was too personal and too near to my heart. There was no shame to it. I didn't care what he would have thought about it, but to share it seemed at that time to cheapen it. I wanted to hold it longer and share it just between me and God. So I simply said, “I've been doing a lot of thinking lately.”

“I noticed this past Sunday that you seemed especially moved.”

I was surprised that he had noticed and even more surprised that he remembered. I did not answer.

After a brief pause, he continued.

“I’ve been praying for you every day since then. I feel like God wants to do something very special in your life.”

Again I sat silent.

“Can I ask you a question?” he said simply. “It’s a hard question but the most important question anyone can possibly consider.”

He paused either waiting for my agreement or just for effect, I did not know which. I just watched him.

“Do you know for sure that you’re going to Heaven?”

I chuckled. If he had known the experience of the past few nights, I’m sure he would have laughed too.

“Yes sir,” I said. “I am sure, beyond doubt.”

“Tell me how?” the pastor asked.

I shared with him the time in my life when I had given my life to Christ. He listened, smiled and nodded.

“So I know for sure I’m going to Heaven,” I concluded, “but you were close in your question to me. I didn’t come to find out for myself, but I came to find out how I can tell others how they can have what I have.”

He seemed taken back a bit. Then I realized that these were probably strange words from someone who almost never even attended church. I decided to clarify myself a little.

“I know that I have been irregular in my attendance but since Sunday God has done such an incredible work in my life that I am sure that my habits will change. I want to see others come to Jesus. It’s like, like a burning inside me.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” he said. “So you want to learn how to tell others, right?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Telling others is not hard,” he said. “It takes willingness but if you think about it, you’ve already told me how to give my life to Jesus.”

“What do you mean?”

“Think about what you’ve told me already. You shared your salvation testimony with me—about when and how you gave your life to Jesus. You see, if you know Jesus and you’re living for Him and you’re willing to tell others about Him, then you’re already prepared to share Him. I’ll teach you a method of sharing God’s plan of salvation, if you like, but first there is something else I want you to consider: I know that you’ve given your life to Jesus and I know you’re willing to share Him, but it does no good to talk about Jesus and share Him if your life doesn’t show Him. In fact, it does great harm to God’s kingdom when someone claims to know Christ and shares Him but lives contrary to His ways. Does that make sense?”

“Yes sir, I think,” I said.

“This may sound harsh to some, but if a person is not willing to live for Jesus, I had much rather them never talk about Him, because in so doing they don’t draw people to Christ but push them away from Him. Lost people look at someone like this and say, ‘Why would I want Jesus? That man is worse than I am or is no different than me. Why would I want his Savior?’”

He took a deep breath. I think he might have thought that he was offending me, but he continued without apology.

“I have had so many people tell me that they don’t want my Jesus because they have known someone who said they knew Him but lived no different than the rest of the world. So, if I am going to train you and help you to be prepared to share Jesus, I first want to know if you are truly serious about living for Him.”

“There have been matters in my life,” I replied, “throughout the years that I knew were wrong. Some were secret; others I did openly, but as I sit here today, pastor, I want you to know that these matters have no place in my life any longer. I want to live for

Jesus and the last thing I want is for my witness to point people to Hell instead of Heaven. Please teach me everything you can to help me grow and be a better witness.”

We spent several hours together that morning. He taught me how to use a method of sharing Jesus although he kept emphasizing that witnessing is not about methods; it's about people. It's about people who are in love with Jesus sharing with people who don't know Him how He has touched and saved their lives. He made it sound so simple, and in truth, it was.

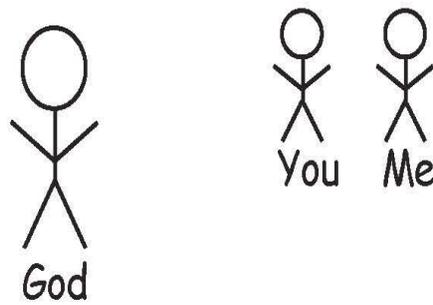
He taught me that the best way to create a conversation where I could share my testimony was by asking, “Can I tell you about the greatest thing that ever happened to me?”

“Most people will say yes, if you ask them,” he said, “and if they say no, then it's probably a bad time anyway. Remember, it's not your job to *save* them. Only God can do that—You're just the witness, called to make the most of every opportunity to share God's love both in your words and your actions.”

The pastor showed me several Bible verses and used a drawing both to help me remember them and to help me explain them. Now, please let me practice on you, for even now, twenty years hence, I try not to go a day without sharing my salvation testimony and walking through the plan of salvation with someone, whether a stranger or a friend.

May I practice on you, please, before finishing my tale?

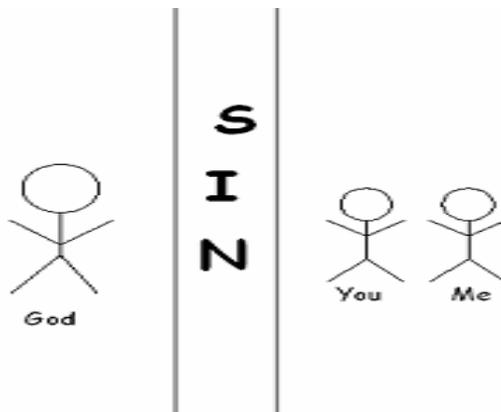
You see, the Bible tells you how you can know for sure that you would spend eternity in Heaven. It's like this:



Let's say that this represents God, and these people represent you and me. You see, God loves you and created you to have a relationship with Him. Even before you were born He loved you and had great plans for your life.

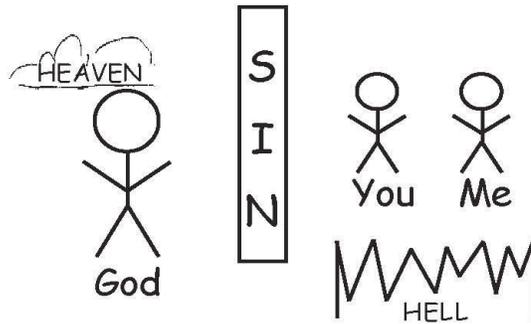
The Bible says, *“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son [Jesus] that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:16).*

But we have a problem called “sin.” Sin is anything we do that's wrong. Picture sin as a Grand Canyon or a great wall that separates us from God. God is perfect—He's never done anything wrong, so He's on one side. But we're not perfect, and because we've all done wrong things, our sin has separated us from God.



The Bible says, *“For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23).*

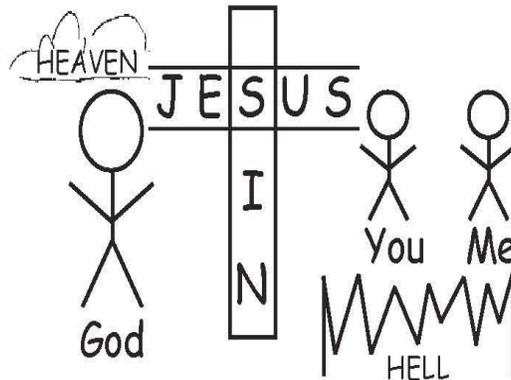
But there's more... You see, sin has a punishment. It's a place called Hell, but God doesn't want you to go there. The Bible says that God created Hell as the punishment for the devil and the other angels that rebelled against Him, but when we did wrong things, Hell became our punishment too. And Hell isn't just the punishment for *really* bad things; one sin, no matter how small, even the littlest of lies, is enough to keep a person out of Heaven.



The Bible says, *“For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord”* (Romans 6:23).

But God has a gift for you: it's Heaven. God wants you to go to Heaven. It doesn't matter what you've said or done—it doesn't matter how bad you've been, God still loves you. But just because He wants us to go to Heaven, doesn't mean that we automatically will. We have to make a choice, but this is what God did: He sent His one and only son who came to earth as a man. He lived a perfect life, and when He died on the cross, God punished Him for all the wrong things you and I would ever do. This is how much God loves you and this is the reason Jesus came—to make a way for you to go to Heaven and to make a way for you to have real life. If sin is the gulf that separates us from God, Jesus built a bridge across it by dying and paying the price for your sins. But Jesus didn't stay

dead. Three days later God raised Him from the dead and He's alive today. That's why He's the only way to go to Heaven.



The Bible says, *“But God showed his love for us, in that, while we were yet sinners Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).*

In the Bible Jesus also said, *‘I am the way, the truth, and the life; no man comes to the Father except through me’” (John 14:6).*

You see, salvation is a gift. Let's say, for example, that someone offers you a million dollars. Is it yours yet? No. What would you have to do to get it?

You would have to accept it—It's a gift! Salvation is a gift too, and like a gift, you can accept it or you can reject it. A gift can't be earned, just like Heaven; you can't be good enough to get into Heaven; going to church can't get you there; baptism can't get you there. There is only one way across that Grand Canyon of sin and that's Jesus.

Now, if someone wanted to give you a million dollars, it would be easy to take it; all you have to do is reach out and it's yours. With God's gift it's a little different. You can't physically reach out and take it, but in the Bible God tells you that there's only one way you can accept this gift of salvation and Heaven: By giving your life to Jesus Christ.

Jesus has already paid the price for your sins, but in order for you to give your life to Him, you have to:

Admit that you have sinned and be willing to turn from your sin.

Believe that Jesus is God's Son who died and was raised from the dead.

Call on the Lord, confess your sins, and commit your life to Him.

The Bible says, "*That if you will confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved*" (Romans 10:9).

The Bible also says, "*For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved*" (Romans 10:13).

Does all this make sense to you?

Would you like to give your life to Christ right now?

If you are willing to accept Jesus as the Savior and Lord of your life, please pray this prayer but realize that repeating a prayer can't get you into Heaven. Words can't "save" you. You have to mean what you say. You have to be willing to make Jesus the Lord and boss of your life. God knows what's in your heart, so if you're willing to give your life to Christ, please pray this aloud after me but don't say it to me. Say it to Jesus:
Dear Jesus,

Thank you for dying for me and offering me Heaven. I'm sorry for the wrong things I've done. Please come into my life and be my Lord and Savior. I give you my life and I surrender myself to you. Thank you for saving me. In Jesus Name, Amen.

Chapter 8

The First Try

The pastor and I talked until noon and then we went to lunch together. It was the beginning of a friendship that lasts to this day.

When we finished, I drove to a mall, just to walk around. I wanted to clear my thoughts and had high hopes of using my new knowledge to share Jesus with someone. I walked through a department store, staring fixedly at every person I passed. One passed; then two; then five; then ten. They all seemed so busy. How was I supposed to approach them?

Finally I entered the main part of the mall. I was on the second floor and as I looked down from the balcony I could see hundreds of people milling around, shopping, talking, sitting on benches, eating ice cream, carrying bags, pushing strollers. It was as if all of life could be found in that one scene. I gripped the railing, just as I had gripped the pew three days earlier.

How many of them knew Jesus? Why weren't Christians busy telling them? How had the church become so silent? What could I do to share Jesus with them all? How could I ever reach them all? There were too many of them. I could never do it. I sat down on a bench that overlooked the first floor. For hours I sat and watched. My stomach became queasy. I felt as though I was once again standing on the ramparts overlooking Hell, just on earth's side of the flames. The people had no urgency about eternity. They didn't seem to care about anything except what interested them at that moment. They didn't even seem to care about each other, just their own busyness, like so many ants going to and fro without realization that the end could soon come.

My heart broke on that bench. I saw a little girl with an ice cream cone. It was dripping down her hand and leaving a trail on the floor. Would she ever come to know Christ?

I saw a teenager. He had body piercings, long black hair, a tattoo on his shoulder, and a large cross chained around his neck. I wondered what that cross meant to him. Did he know Jesus? For the first time in life I didn't care what the person looked like on the outside; my only concern was for what was on the inside. I prayed that his cross represented my Jesus and not just a cool trinket or token of some fake faith.

An old gentleman walked past me. He used a cane. His head bent low and his hands shook. I wondered about his salvation. How long would he live in such a state? Where would he go when he died?

I rose to leave, deep in thought and prayer, when another person caught my eye. He was about my age, sitting by himself on a bench not too far from me. He had several bags sitting at his feet and I figured that he was probably waiting for his wife or girlfriend who must be in a nearby shop. Without thinking I walked toward him. I swallowed hard.

"Excuse me, sir," I said. "But I just saw you sitting here and was wondering if I could tell you about the greatest thing that ever happened to me."

His smile twisted into a bothered look. He shook his head.

"No. No thanks," he muttered. "I'm *not* interested."

"But..."

Then he looked away and I could tell that the conversation was over.

I walked away. I felt defeated and deflated. He didn't even give me a chance. He didn't even know what I was going to say. If only he knew, then he would have paid attention. How could he not care? How could all these people go about their daily business and not care? How could they not consider eternity or at least face the question of what happens when this life ends? How could I reach them if they didn't want to be reached?

I walked slowly to my car. My heart hurt from sorrow and I felt angry, but not at the man. I was angry at Hell. I was angry at the church. I was angry at Christians and most especially, at myself—angry that we have not given a good presentation of Jesus to the world because if we really lived what we say we believe, then we wouldn't be able to beat the world back from Jesus, so badly would they want Him.

Chapter 9
Doers of the Word

That evening I returned to church for the Wednesday night prayer meeting. I arrived fifteen minutes early, which was extremely unusual for me, but as I entered the auditorium, I thought that I must have surely misunderstood the time. Only a handful of people were there. Maybe, I thought, it doesn't begin for another hour. Or, perhaps I missed it, but the people weren't leaving, but sitting, obviously waiting.

A bit confused, I moved toward the back section where everyone was sitting and took a seat on a pew by myself behind a kind-looking lady whom I didn't recognize.

We all sat in a quiet, awkward silence for a few minutes.

Another lady arrived and talked in hushed whispers to a couple sitting at the front of the section. I watched them for a moment and began to feel extremely uncomfortable.

"What time does this begin?" I quietly asked the lady in front of me.

It felt good to break the silence.

"In just a few minutes," she said with a smile. "We're glad you're here. Are you new in town?" she asked.

"Ah, no," I stammered, my face reddening with embarrassment.

"Well," she paused in an awkward sort of way, "is this your first time to our church?"

"No, uh, I've been here a while."

Part of me wanted to tell her that I had been a member of this church for twelve years, but then I realized that never in twelve years had I come to a prayer meeting. Never in twelve years did I come on any time other than Sunday morning. She had no reason to know me or to know that I was a part of this church, because I hadn't been a part of the church. I had been a twelve-year spectator, who showed up for an hour, shook a few hands, knew a few names of people who sat near my usual seat and then, once I had fulfilled my religious duty, I left to get on with lunch and other plans. I felt ashamed and she looked embarrassed as she turned around.

“Look,” I said, leaning forward. “Don't feel bad about not knowing me. I've been a member of this church for twelve years but I have been a poor excuse for a member. I've only ever come on Sunday mornings and even then, not regularly, but this past week something in me has changed. God has gotten hold of me in a way I never knew He could. I'm a different man now.”

The words rang in my ears: *I'm a different man now.*

She smiled.

“God has a way of meeting people where they are. He changed my life, you see. Four years after I was saved, he changed my life and I was never the same again.”

Her words settled on me. I had never thought of God changing someone's life years after that person had given his life to Him. Maybe that's what was happening to me. Would I ever be the same again?

I wrestled with these thoughts as I watched the pastor enter. He shook all of our hands and greeted us all by name. After chatting for a few minutes he moved a small podium to the front of the back section, prayed and began to share God's Word. He

looked rather odd, preaching to so few people in such a large place, with a podium moved halfway down the aisle to the back section.

The pastor shared a short, but powerful devotion. He read out of James 1, about being doers of the Word and not hearers only. Then he talked about several matters Christians say they believe but where our lives don't always agree with our words.

At the end of his message he briefly turned to eternity.

“We all say that we believe in Heaven and Hell. We say we believe what God says about these, but how many of us actually live like there is a real Heaven or Hell?”

Then he shared a story that stills rests with me today:

“Charlie Peace,” he said, “was a criminal. The laws of God or man didn't matter to him and finally the law caught up with him and he was condemned to death. On the morning of his execution in Armley Jail in Leeds, England, he was taken on the death-walk. Before him went the prison chaplain, routinely and sleepily reading some Bible verses. The criminal touched the preacher and asked what he was reading. ‘The Consolations of Religion,’ was the reply. Charlie Peace was shocked at the way he professionally read about Hell. Could a man be so unmoved under the very shadow of the scaffold as to lead a fellow-human there and yet, dry-eyed, read of a pit that has no bottom into which this fellow must fall? Could this preacher believe the words that there is an eternal fire that never consumes its victims, and yet slide over the phrase without a tremor? Is a man human at all who can say with no tears, ‘You will be eternally dying and yet never know the relief that death brings?’ All this was too much for Charlie Peace. So he preached, in a manner of speaking. Listen to his on-the-eve-of-Hell sermon: ‘Sir,’ he said, addressing the preacher, ‘if I believed what you and the church of God say that

you believe, even if England were covered with broken glass from coast to coast, I would walk over it, if need be, on hands and knees and think it worth while living, just to save one soul from an eternal Hell like that!”¹

I sat stunned. This man was now dead. This was a testimony from Hell. I thought of the hand I had seen reaching to me in the dream of the previous night. I thought about Charlie Peace and felt that I too would crawl over a country of glass, if it meant I could see one soul saved from a Hell like that.

Chapter 10

Pictures of the Past

After church I drove home, ate a late-night snack and I remember lying in bed with a sense of fearful anticipation. I considered again the story of Charlie Peace, played through the plan of salvation in my head and prayed for the people I had seen at the mall. I especially prayed for the man on the bench. With these thoughts and in this attitude of prayer, I slipped into sleep but little did I know that the direction of my dreams were about to change.

I opened my eyes and found myself standing on top of a small hill with a trail before me that led into a dark forest. The area looked very familiar but I couldn't quite place it. The wind gently touched my face. The sun was beginning to set, but it was the trees that seemed to evoke memories of something long ago. Then I saw them—two boys running to the top of the hill. They bustled my way, though they did not seem to see me. I greeted them:

“Hello!” I said, but there was no response. Without a doubt, I was invisible to them, a spectator and nothing more and though they couldn't hear me, I could hear them clearly.

“Come on, we're gonna be late,” one of them called out, suddenly looking up with a laugh and a smile. At once I recognized the voice. I recognized the hair, the eyes, everything about this boy. I remembered his blue jacket and even though he was facing me, I knew that his name was written across the back of it. After all, his name was the same as mine. It was me, many years in the past, when I was but a child.

The other boy was my best friend. From kindergarten until the day we graduated and moved to different coasts and different colleges, we had been inseparable. Never since

had I grown so close to a friend. I supposed, in a way, that no one had ever taken his place in my life. Yes, we remained friends through our college years, though we were on opposite sides of the country, but eventually the calls lessened and we lost touch with one another. I supposed I hadn't talked to him in nearly a decade.

I hurried behind the boys as they darted down the path into the woods. They laughed as they ran and cut jokes at each other and though they didn't mention it, I knew where they had been. I remembered this day, this place. This was his grandparents' farm. I had visited it often with him. Without a doubt I knew that this was the day that we had snuck across the fence to the neighbor's farm and eaten one of his watermelons. The smell of the air brought back all the memories of the day. I remembered the taste of the melon and the run through the woods. I even knew that I would trip at the edge of the forest and scrape my hands and that his grandmother would scold us because the neighbor had already called to tell her what we had done. I remembered everything.

Yet, as the boys neared the edge of the woods and a small, white house came into view, a strange mist came upon me. I slowed my pace and everything began to change. The trees around me became shadows, the light from the windows of the farm house melted into a glow, and then everything changed. I was no longer in a dark forest; I found myself standing in the hallway of my high school. Students passed me, students that I knew, or that I had once known. Their faces were familiar, though most of their names were now long forgotten.

Then I saw an older version of myself, wearing my old letter jacket. Again my best friend was at my side. Our hair was long and unkempt and curtained the sides of our faces. I followed the pair as they left the hall and sat down in the cafeteria.

"Hey, quit joking," my friend said. "I really like her."

"You don't stand a chance with her," the younger version of me said in a mocking tone.

"Come on, really. What do you think? Should I ask her out?"

“Sure, if you like getting shot down.”

I remembered this situation too. It was our freshman year and a new girl had come to school. Later he would ask her to the school dance and she would say no. I remembered how deeply her rejection had hurt him. Even so, he continued to like her for the rest of our days in high school. Suddenly I missed him. I suppose that I had never again developed such a strong friendship. We told each other everything...well, almost everything.

I never told him about Jesus.

“Hey, what are you doing this Friday night?” my friend asked.

“Well,” the younger me stammered, “I’m going to this church thing. I really don’t want to but my parents want me to go.”

“Do you want me to come?” he asked. I knew he was sincere.

“No,” I muttered. “It’ll be really boring. You wouldn’t like it.”

Why had I acted this way? What was I thinking? What was I scared of? He was my best friend! We talked about a lot of things...but we never talked about Jesus. I never asked him if he was going to Heaven? I never asked him if he had given his life to Christ? I never even mentioned it. If anything, the words I said and the way I lived pointed him away from Christ.

My head hung in shame. My heart dropped and the scene around me changed once more, though I paid little attention to it.

I found myself standing in a kitchen but it was not one that I recognized. Unlike the other situations, I could never recall having been there before. A lady was cooking. Her back was to me. She had short, blonde hair. She was humming happily. Two little girls scurried around her feet and then jumped up to the counter with coloring books and crayons. The mother turned. I did know her. It was the new girl who had come to school, the one my best friend had liked for so long, the one who had rejected his offer to go to the school dance. Without a doubt, it was her, just older.

Suddenly and to my great surprise, my best friend entered the room. He was older too, about the age I was then. He was wearing a gray suit and a crisp white shirt with a red, striped tie. He looked good, I thought. I hadn't seen him for so long...and he had married her! I wondered at him in amazement. What had happened? When had they crossed paths again? How had they come to be together? I wanted to ask him, to know it all.

He kissed her and then each of the girls on their heads. Then he picked up a briefcase. I followed him out of the house, a very nice house, and walked behind him to his car. I talked to him the whole way. I had so many questions and even though I knew he couldn't hear me and wouldn't answer me, I couldn't help but to ramble out my thoughts.

Somehow with the change of scenes, my mood had changed as well. A few moments earlier my head and heart had hung and gloom had surrounded me, but now everything seemed fresh and exciting. I laughed aloud. I would have never imagined that they would end up together and with two beautiful, little girls.

“You dog!” I burst, “Why didn't you call and tell me? I can't believe that you married her. That's what you always wanted. It looks like you got everything you always wanted—a nice house, a nice car, a beautiful family. Wow! I wish we could talk. There's so much I would say...so much I want to know.”

He drove without any acknowledgement of my presence. He was smiling slightly, obviously deep in thought. I recognized the look on his face. I had seen it many times before. He was pondering something, planning something—something that made him happy. It made me feel good.

The sun was beginning to fade. My old friend took off his sunglasses, set them aside and then began to fiddle with the radio. He flipped from station to station and then tried a CD. He ejected it, set it aside and reached into a compartment on the dash for a different one. He fumbled it and it fell loosely onto the passenger's side, at my feet. I watched as

he reached across to grab it. His fingers felt for it but it was just out of reach. Finally, he leaned all the way over and caught hold of it, but when he did, he unknowingly turned the steering wheel. I watched as the car began to veer off the road.

“Look out!” I yelled.

We were heading for a large pole. I yelled again but he couldn’t hear me. By the time he looked up, there was no time to react. I watched as the pole exploded. The engine was pushed onto my lap. The windshield shattered. The car around me crumpled and yet I was untouched. I felt no pain. It didn’t even jolt me. I sat in the wreckage physically unhurt, but I felt a different pain deep in my chest. I closed my eyes.

“No. No. No,” I whispered. I didn’t want to see. I didn’t want to look.

“No, please no.”

I could hear my heart pounding in my ears. Each thump hammered with greater loudness. I don’t know how long I sat there, in silence, blinding myself to the scene around me. Nothing happened, though I longed for something to happen. No one moved, though I waited for it. I felt as if time stood still and it would continue to stand still until I did what I thought I could never do. I had to open my eyes. I fought and I struggled but somehow I knew this scene wouldn’t go away until I did.

With a sigh, I heaved a deep breath and wiped the tears from my face. Then I slowly opened my eyes. At a glance I knew he was dead. Nobody could have survived the injuries he had sustained, and I wept.

I had other dreams that night as well, dreams of other people I had once known. I saw myself and an old girlfriend holding hands on a park bench. The sun was setting and we were sitting silent after enjoying a full day together. Was she saved? Did she know Jesus? I did not know. I had not thought of her in years.

Again, as a child I saw myself selling lemonade to a neighbor. I lived next to him for more than ten years, but I didn’t know anything about him spiritually. I never talked to him about it. Likewise, I watched myself sitting on a porch with a guy with whom I had

once mowed lawns; I saw others too, people that I had never told about Jesus or whom my actions or words had pointed away from Him. I watched myself cuss, lose my temper, mistreat people, and worse things that I will not mention to you for the sake of time. I was supposed to be a “Christian.” I went to church—everybody knew I did, but I wasn’t any different than anyone else. Why would they want my Jesus?

Before long, all the dreams became a blur of tears although none except the vision of my best friend took me all the way to the end of a life. All the others finished in the days when I still knew them or with the conversations where I could have told them about Jesus but remained silent. Perhaps the others were still alive. Perhaps they were dead and God’s grace spared me from the pain of knowing it. I don’t know. I have searched for them all, for two decades now, and have never been able to find even one of the people I dreamed about that night. I had my chance then, I suppose, and sometimes opportunities that have passed never return again. I have entrusted them all into God’s hands, that He might send someone else their way, someone who will not be ashamed, who will live what they say they believe and who will show them the way as I now know it.

The dream of my friend, however, will be with me the rest of my life. I was forever changed by that knowledge, and it was true. His was the only family that I was able to track down. It took several weeks to find them and when I did, I was told that he had died a year earlier. It had been a car accident and he had died instantly.

There was, however, one more thing about my dream that night. At the very end of it, as everything grew black, I heard a voice, the same voice I had heard before.

“Please tell me,” it said and I awoke.

Chapter 11

Sent, Not Led

A deep heaviness loomed over me as I sorted through boxes in my attic. At last I found it, one of my old yearbooks. I spent hours thumbing through it, seeing my past as I had never seen it before. This, however, only increased my gloom and, as with other nights, I at last found my comfort in God's Word.

I almost finished reading the New Testament that night. I read about the bowls and broken seals in the book of Revelation, and though I must admit that there was much that I did not fully understand, there was no misunderstanding the end. There was a real judgment to come and a real Hell. That's where I stopped reading for the night, chapter twenty of the book of Revelation. With only a couple of chapters left, I stopped when I reached a description of the judgment. I just couldn't go any further, so I spent the rest of the time rereading parts that I had underlined and reviewing what I had recently learned. Eventually I drifted off again and when I woke, I had a desire to meet with the pastor again.

I was hesitant to disturb him two days in a row, but I had questions I needed to ask. So, with a great apology, I entered his office again. He discarded my apology and sat down as he had the day before, as if any question I might have carried a world of importance to him.

I told him about my experience at the mall the previous day, about how I had felt in seeing so many people, about the man on the bench who didn't even want to listen, about how I felt so overwhelmed. Again I made no mention of my dreams. I asked him how I could make a difference to people. There were so many of them and I felt such an

urgency to tell them all, but I couldn't reach them all and even if I could, what if, like the man on the bench, they wouldn't listen to me.

“Not everyone you come across will want Jesus. Many people have known too many Christians who said one thing and lived another. Because these ‘Christians’ were fake, people believe that their Jesus, our Jesus, is fake as well.”

I listened without response though I could feel my face burn with shame. He was talking about me.

“Not everyone will listen,” he said, “and not all of those who listen will accept Christ. But your job as a believer is not to force anyone to become a Christian, but simply to spread the Good News. Like I told you yesterday: *You* can't save anyone. That's God's job. Your job is to be the witness and if someone doesn't want to listen, like the man you met yesterday, then you simply move to the next person you meet. And if they listen but don't receive Christ, then you haven't failed. You've been faithful to share the truth and you just have to leave the rest up to God. Just pray and trust that God will continue to work on that person's heart.”

“But how can any of us truly make a difference?” I asked. “It's just too much.”

“Here's a story that might help,” he said. “Once there was a young boy walking on a beach. There were thousands of starfish that has washed ashore and the boy knew that they would all die if they weren't thrown back into the sea. He picked up one and threw it back in, then another and another. Now, a man on that beach was watching the boy and eventually approached him. ‘What are you doing,’ he asked and the boy told him that he was throwing the starfish back in the sea to save them. The man chuckled and pointed down the beach. ‘Look at them all,’ he said. ‘There are thousands of them. What kind of difference do you think you can really make?’ The boy paused, then looked down at the starfish in his hand. He threw it into the ocean and said, ‘I don't know what kind of difference I can make to them all, but I know the difference I made to that one.’”

“We can’t get caught up in the hugeness of our task to tell the world about Jesus, but just try to make a difference in one life at a time.”

“But should I try to tell everyone about Jesus or do I need to wait until I feel led to tell them?”

“No,” he said simply. “Do you feel led to breathe? No, it’s something that comes natural. Sharing your faith in Jesus comes natural for someone who loves Him and is walking with Him. You see, most of us have it all backwards: we’re waiting until God says go when we should be going until God says wait. Does that make sense?”

“Yeah, I think so. But does God ever lead us to talk to someone specific?”

“Of course He does. It’s kind of like this. The Bible talks about a farmer going about and throwing out seed. That’s like sharing the Gospel. We’re called to go throwing out the truth and sometimes it will land in someone’s heart who is ready and willing. But in the middle of throwing out the seed, sometimes God will specifically direct us to an individual.”

“But how do I know the difference?”

“You just step out in faith and if you step the wrong direction, God will let you know. He wants you to be effective more than you do and He wants people to be saved more than you ever could. You just have to trust Him.”

“When Dr. Wayland Hoyt was pastor in Brooklyn,” he continued, “he was leading some special meetings. Among those who showed some interest in the Gospel was a gentleman for whom he had often prayed. He noticed his attendance one night and thought he ought to speak to him about his relationship with God, but because of fear he didn’t. On another night when he had returned to his home late, he found himself too disturbed to sleep and was reading in his study. As he read, something seemed to whisper in his ear, *Go and see that man tonight*. But he mentally replied, *It’s after twelve o’clock and he’s asleep with everyone in bed*. He read on. But the impression remained and grew. He argued, *It’s snowing and I’m tired!* He complained, *I’ve been working hard all day*

and I don't want to go! But all excuses to the side, the urge continued and at last he yielded and went. As he touched the man's doorbell, he thought to himself, *What a fool I am to be ringing a man's bell at one o'clock in the morning. He'll think I'm insane.* But instantly the door opened, and the man stood there fully clothed and said, "Come in. And God bless you. You are the man I have been waiting for all night. My wife and children are all asleep, but I could not sleep; I felt that I must find Jesus tonight."²

We talked for more than an hour and as I left, I felt relieved. I didn't have to know everything. I didn't have to figure it all out. I didn't have to have all the answers. I only had to trust Him who did. I felt relieved that I couldn't save anyone and that I was only called to be a faithful witness. Whether they listened or not, whether they accepted Jesus or not, I was just called to do my best. I was being faithful just by trying and no matter what their response, I could trust God with the results.

I praised God for this on the way home and an overwhelming peace seemed to fill the car. I couldn't imagine a better life than what I now had. I lost myself in these thoughts and came back to reality only as I pulled into my driveway and the low gas warning light dinged on my dash.

Chapter 12

A Picture of the Future

I don't remember what happened the rest of that day but I will never forget what happened that night. It was last night of my journey and if each previous night could be compared to a splinter, this final step could be compared to a knife. So deep did it cut to the core of my being that I know already that I will not be able to do justice to it by any description that I may give to you.

I remember sitting on my bed, nestled deep beneath a mountain of covers. I prayed for a long while before finally picking up my Bible to finish the last few chapters of the book of Revelation and the end of the New Testament. I had stopped the previous night in chapter twenty, when the apostle John began to describe his vision of the future. God had given him a glimpse of the end of time, after this world is gone, after Satan is judged and punished, when all that is left is eternity itself. At this time there is a judgment reserved only for the lost. Many people have named this judgment "The Great White Throne Judgment" and I believe that it is to me even to this day, the saddest part of Scripture. Here lies a description of people, *real* people, some of whom you and I know and have talked with or lived with or sat by in class or to whom we've chatted idly about the weather or bought a burger from...real people who lived real lives and who died without Christ. And there is the sadness of it all: These real people will be thrown into a real Hell forever...forever. And this isn't just some story that John was telling or that he

had heard, even from God. He saw it. He saw them. He saw it happen. He stood there and watched it and then gave us a report of a future that is still yet to happen.

Listen to what I read that night:

“Then I saw a great white throne and One seated on it. Earth and Heaven fled from His presence, and no place was found for them. I also saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life, and the dead were judged according to their works by what was written in the books.

“Then the sea gave up its dead, and Death and Hades gave up their dead; all were judged according to their works. Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. And anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire” (Revelation 20:11-15).

I read these words again and again. I couldn't get them out of my mind so I decided to keep reading. And as greatly as these verses disturbed me, the following chapters to the end of the Bible encouraged me. Yes, Hell is real, but so is Heaven and God is there in His fullness and those who commit their lives to Christ will live there forever. Not just dwell there, but *live* there. What life! What great and unimaginable life! Nothing in this world, no story, no emotion, no color, no existence, nothing, I say, can compare to the brightness of that place. The difference is as vast as comparing a light bulb to the sun. They both might be round; they both might give light but the experience of one is but a shallow taste, a vague shadow of the other. Here we live because we know Christ, but there we live beyond living as we will know Him as He knows us. Here we live, but there

we will learn a life beyond living. How great it will be! Oh, that all might be a part of its wonder!

Forgive me, please, for as deep as an emotion I might show toward Hell, I feel it twice as strong for Heaven. Rarely do we weep over the just punishment of a convict, but our movies are filled with plots of love and reunion, dear embraces and noble acts of honor and such matters stain our faces with tears. Now, please understand, I do cry over Hell. How could anyone not! But I don't cry for the punishment, for it is just. I cry instead for the people, for God did everything possible to save them and still they died in their sins. How great a loss! How great a tragedy!

A moment, please. Let me recompose myself and return to my story, for I am now near the end.

Now, where was I? Yes, yes. I read of Heaven. What a wonder and how I wish I could have dreamed of it, for even while awake, I long for it. There lies my real home. My citizenship is there and the journey of this life, no matter how rough or bumpy, and no matter what storms I may face or what rapids I may navigate, Heaven will be my final destination. All my paths end there...or perhaps I should say, all my paths begin there. Both statements are true.

Anyway, I would have loved to have dreamed of Heaven. I remember thinking such I laid on my bed, but such was not given to me. I closed my eyes and commended myself to the Lamb, as the book of Revelation calls Him.

In such a state and with these same emotions, I awakened in a vision. Once again I stood on a terrible shore with an ocean of suffering before me. Dark flames licked the blackness though I could somehow see through it again. And though wisps of sulfur and

smoke swirled about me, I smelled nothing after my first gulp of the deathly stench. I was immediately drenched in sweat. I remember it pouring from my cheeks, mingled with tears as I watched a chorus of hands reach out again, gasping and begging but for one drop from my face. They couldn't see me, of course. I was invisible to them, a spectator of the most gruesome sight ever. I had always been a spectator. I had stood on the sidelines of spiritual reality and done nothing but watch as people, perhaps these people, had passed by me. I had been silent. I wondered if my best friend was out there; if I would hear him call my name; if the dead eyes that I now saw staring up through that eternal wash of liquid flame were eyes that had once looked at me. I wondered if my ex-girlfriend was out there somewhere or if the unrecognizable fingers reaching my way were the same fingers that I had once held. I thought of my neighbor and the others about whom I had dreamed. Could they now be here, before me in this lake of eternal doom, cursed forever and cast from the presence of a holy God?

I crumbled to me knees. Sobs heaved in my chest until I could hardly breathe. So loud was my anguish that for a moment I couldn't seem to hear them—those terrible cries, those screams—screams of sorrow and regret. For a long while I listened and realized that not one of them leveled an accusation against God; not one leveled against Him a charge of injustice, for in this place separated from the Person of Truth, all knew the truth—God is just. He did everything He could to save these people. He even brutally sacrificed His own Son. Then, in the midst of a deeper despair than I will ever know on this earth, a realization washed over me—God didn't send people here. People sent themselves here by their choice to reject Him as Savior and Lord. And I wept harder than I ever had, not only for the lost souls before me but for the heart of a loving God.

I do not know how long I wept on that shore. I bowed my head towards Hell and pledged my all to stop its population.

Then amid the suffering wails, I heard a soft voice.

“Please tell me,” it said.

I opened my eyes. I had fallen flat against the ground, flames licking my face. Beyond I could see torment as I had never seen it before. People, though they didn’t look like people, twisted and contorted in agony. Hideous forms and horrific shadows skirted the depths below me. It was death embodied. To look at them, though they moved, was to see death, burning and writhing—Everything was dead. Dead eyes. Dead faces, if you could call those things faces. Dead. Empty. Horrid. I hated what I saw. It was the full-grown child of sin, the second death. I hated everything about it and for a moment, as a gruesome face bubbled my way, I hated the people too. I know it was wrong but it was like seeing sin take bodily form. I hated everything about it.

Suddenly, as these thoughts crossed my mind, I was pulled downward, as if two invisible hands had reached out of the pit and grabbed my head. I felt myself falling, drowning. My lungs burned. I couldn’t breathe. I screamed but my ears heard nothing. I cried but my tears burned dry. I writhed in pain as a man baptized within a pit of hot embers, blanketed only by the boiling oil of Adam’s sin. My heart exploded. My lungs drown in the fury of liquid fire and my chest became as a furnace, cooked beyond boiling and baked beyond measure. Oh, how my body convulsed. Skin, muscle, bone—they all melted as my life died but my existence remained. Again I screamed, the tremor of which shook to the soles of my feet, but no sound came save a high-toned squeal which was quickly swallowed by the chorus of suffering sinners surrounding me.

Oh! The dread of that moment, the pain I felt that no man has ever felt on the face of this kind world. No image of horror; no concept of torture; no knowledge of pain; no nightmare of any grade throughout all time and beyond could conceive such sufferings, such hellish lamentations, such death.

I cannot share with you the rest that I experienced in that brief moment. It is too much for me, too much for words, except to say that I eventually screamed and heard myself. I breathed deep and my lungs filled with air. I sat straight up and though my light was on and my eyes were open I felt that I could still see those dark flames blazing about the room. But it was over. I was alive. I was at home in my bed. Oh, joyous relief. I was alive; and not only was I alive, but I was saved. I was a living person who lived among the living. I had life and no one and nothing could ever take it from me. I would never know separation from God.

For more than an hour I lay in bed, trembling, bathed in a cold sweat. My sheets were wet. My hands were white and I remembered the white knuckles I had seen on these same hands just a few days earlier, as I sat in church, resisting God. I pledged that I would never resist Him again. I would serve Him because I loved Him. Any fear I had held, even at the brink of Hell, His perfect love had cast away.

At last I sat up and reached once more for my Bible. I had now finished the New Testament, but I turned again to that stirring chapter twenty of Revelation and read again,

“Then I saw a great white throne and One seated on it. Earth and Heaven fled from His presence, and no place was found for them. I also saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was

opened, which is the book of life, and the dead were judged according to their works by what was written in the books.

“Then the sea gave up its dead, and Death and Hades gave up their dead; all were judged according to their works. Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. And anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire” (Revelation 20:11-15).

I would know people in this judgment. I would see them there. I would see my best friend and he would have every right to look at me from across that great gap that will separate the saved and the lost, that gulf that stands forever between Heaven and Hell, between the children of God and children of wrath, and he would have every right to yell at me: “You never told me! You never told me! You knew the truth. You were saved. You were safe, but I was not. Why? Why did you never tell me?!”

A tear slid down my cheek. How many people would I see in this judgment whom I had once known? The thought stirred me as I continued reading.

Suddenly I stopped again. Here was something that I had not caught it before. I read it again, Revelation 21:4, “...and He [God] shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there shall no longer be any death; there shall not longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away.”

We weren't on earth. The heavens and the earth had already passed away. Why were we crying? I knew the answer. Because, four verses earlier we had just seen friends, relatives, work associates, neighbors and others we had known judged and “...*thrown into the lake of fire*” (Rev. 20:15). Of course we will be crying. There is not one of us who will not know someone on the other side! All we, believers in Christ, will witness

this event. We will see them, millions upon millions standing, great and small, hopeless before Christ, and how many of them might have come to know Him if we had but told them...if we had just lived what we claim we believe and not have been ashamed to speak up about it. Who cares what they think? Who cares what they say? Who cares if we are persecuted or teased or called names or even put to death if we can but save one soul from Hell? None of these trivial things will matter when we witness the final outcome of the reality in which we now live.

Then God Himself shall wipe our tears, every tear from our eyes and death will be gone and along with it He will wipe away the mourning, the crying and the pain of what we have just witnessed and of the role so many of us have so far played in it. He will wipe away the pain of it all and then we will live with Him forever in Heaven.

Never before had I so longed to be a part of bringing someone to Christ. In that moment all my inhibitions died. It shouted out, “Here I am, Oh God. I will go!”

Then in my heart, a voice seemed to whisper something. I actually cocked my head. A chill shivered down my spine.

“Go get gas for you car,” the impression seemed to say.

“That’s crazy,” I thought, and I laid back down.

Chapter 13

Life at Last

“Go get gas for you car,” the words seemed to echo in my head.

“How unspiritual!” I thought to myself. “In the middle of committing my life to God’s service and I start thinking about how my gas tank is low!”

I rolled over and turned out the light, somewhat disgusted at myself but the impression seemed to persist. Then I began to consider the story the pastor had told me about the preacher God had led to someone in the middle of the night.

“Could this be God?” I wondered. “Surely not.”

But at last the determination of the thought was so strong that I feared to resist it.

“I’ll go,” I said, as I rolled out of bed. I dressed myself hastily and somewhat lazily. I felt ridiculous, like a child trying to make something happen. I really didn’t expect anything, except to get a full tank of gas. In spite of all that had happened, somehow I still didn’t think that God could use me.

Nevertheless I drove down the street to the place where I usually filled up my car. No other cars were there. The place seemed empty compared to how it always bustled during the day. I exited the car and picked up the gas nozzle, scanning the parking lot for any sign of life. No one was there. I filled up my car, waiting for another vehicle to drive up or for someone to walk out of the darkness and say, “Can you tell me about Jesus?”

I suddenly felt silly as the nozzle clicked off. Nothing had happened. Disappointment set in. I chastised myself under my breath and cast away the burden as an immature act of someone who wanted to serve God and was just getting too emotional.

Then I entered the store to pay for my gas. No other customers were there and though I had entered those doors hundreds of times, never before had I had the eyes to see what I now saw. The place was full of beer. Large posters of half-dressed models sitting on cars with alcoholic beverages surrounding them littered the walls. Cigarettes filled the top part of the window behind the counter. Pornographic magazines filled the bottom. How could I ever have walked through such filth and not noticed it?

“You look concerned, sir,” a kind voice said. “Are you okay?” the young lady behind the counter asked simply.

I didn’t respond at first. I was still taking in the scene. How could I have never noticed all this? How could I have been so blind?

“Please tell me,” she said kindly.

“Please tell me,” she had said. *“Please tell me!”* I thought. Something about those words, something about that voice sounded familiar.

I looked up with such a jerk of movement that she seemed startled.

I cleared my throat, more from shock and than from necessity.

“Ah, what was that?” I stumbled.

“I said you looked really concerned about something,” she said.

“Oh. I am concerned, very concerned actually,” I said gently. “You see, I’m concerned for you, young lady.”

Needless to say, she looked perplexed although her eyes seemed to sparkle. She brushed the hair to one side of her face and kept her eyes fixed on me as though waiting for me to continue.

“Can I,” I said without hesitation, and though I had imagined that saying it would be hard, in truth it was easy. “Can I tell you about the greatest thing that ever happened to me?”

She nodded. It was late and she obviously had nothing else to do. The timing couldn't have been better.

I stood there at that store counter and shared with her the truth of God's Word, the same truth that I had carried silently for so many years. But no longer. I shared with her how God is perfect and we are not, how there is a punishment for sin but a gift of God, which is Heaven. I told her how much the Lord loves her in spite of her sins. The concept of God loving her seemed to be a new idea to her and as she brightened, my face burned with shame. Our church stood two blocks away. Surely she passed it every day and yet the simplest concepts of God's truth were foreign to her. As a church, and as a Christian, I realized that we had done a fine job of locking up the Gospel within the walls of a building. Why were we waiting for people to come to church instead of taking the church to them? I pushed these thoughts away and continued on.

I told her how Jesus suffered and died to pay the price for her sins and how He had come back to life three days later. I shared that He was alive and that He could save her and give her a brand new life if she was willing to turn from her sin and commit her life to Him.

“Would you like to give your life to Christ?” I asked. The words tumbled quickly from my mouth, not from nervousness of asking but in nervous anticipation of her answer.

She paused. Her eyes dropped to the counter.

I swallowed and held my breath.

“Yes,” she said in that kind, soft tone. She looked up. There were tears in her eyes. “I've been feeling very empty and questioning if God was even real. I prayed this

morning and ask Him to *please tell me* if He was really out there. And He sent you. I want what you're talking about—I've wanted it my whole life."

We talked for a few more minutes and then at that old, dirty store counter, surrounded by a mountain of beer cans, with cigarettes and pornographic magazines behind us, we bowed our heads and she prayed to commit her life to Jesus.

"Dear Lord Jesus," she prayed. "Thank you for dying for me and making a way for me to go to Heaven. I'm sorry for all the wrong things I've done. I give you my life. I want you to be my Lord and Savior."

Then, as if she knew something inside had changed, she smiled as she said, "Thank you for saving me. In Jesus' name—Amen."

She looked up. I will never forget the look in her eyes. They sparkled with life. With God's kind of life! Nobody needed to say, "You're sins are gone." She knew it. Nobody needed to say, "Tonight God has changed your life," because she was now breathing in that new life for the first time ever. What a wonder it was!

I can still remember the joy I felt that day. I never knew that such joy existed and there is truly nothing in all of the world like it. If Hell is the utter absence of joy, then when you get to share in the salvation of another, there is a piece of Heaven you get to taste on earth.

I never knew that God could use me...but He did.

Chapter 14

Partings

My heart burst with joy as I drove home that night. I was a man with no special abilities. I was common and ordinary, just as you see my now. I have no great words or wisdom. I am a simple man and I never knew that God could use someone like me. For the first time in my life I realized that I could make a difference in eternity. My only qualification was willingness. Am I willing? I am. Are you?

I knelt and praised God for a long time that night. There were no more dreams after that although the echo of that kind, soft voice, saying “*Please tell me*” still resounds in my heart today.

No, never again did I have other visions of death and Hell though I had a new vision for life and living, to reach as many for Christ as I can while I still have breath in my lungs. This is my call. This is your call. Come and join me, if you’re willing.

Dear Lord,

Today I am stepping across the line. I'm finished with sin and compromise; I'm tired of wavering; I'm done with being useless. I've made my choice; the verdict is in; I'm going Your way and there's no turning back for me.. This is my pledge: Dear Lord Jesus, however, whenever, wherever, and whatever You ask me to do, my answer in advance is yes! Wherever You lead and whatever the cost, I'm ready. Anytime. Anywhere. Anyway. Whatever it takes, Lord; whatever it takes! I want to be used by You in such a way, that on that final day I'll hear You say, "Well done, my good and faithful servant! Come and share in Your master's happiness!"

May it be so! —Amen

"When I say to the wicked, 'You shall surely die'; and you do not warn him or speak out to warn the wicked from his wicked way that he may live that wicked man shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand" (Ezekiel 3:18)

Daily Declaration

Today I am stepping across the line. I'm finished with sin and compromise; I'm tired of wavering; I'm done with being useless. I've made my choice; the verdict is in; I'm going God's way and my decision is irrevocable. There's no turning back for me.

I will live the rest of my life serving God's purpose with God's people on God's planet for God's glory. I will use my life to celebrate His presence, cultivate His character, participate in His family, demonstrate His love, and communicate His Word.

There is only one road before me—a journey into the depths of God. My chief aim is to glorify Him and enjoy Him forever, to know Him intimately and to make Him known. Therefore, I surrender my heart; I submit my life; I die to my dreams, to my desires, to my ambitions, and to myself, that I may seek His face; that I may know only one passion in life and it is He.

I will do my best to give my all to Jesus today. And by God's grace I'll keep running my race with my eyes on the goal, not the sidelines or those running beside me; when times get tough, and I get tired, I won't back up, back off, back down, or backslide. I cannot be bought, I will not be compromised, and I shall not quit until I finish the race.

This is my pledge: Dear Lord Jesus, however, whenever, wherever, and whatever You ask me to do, my answer in advance is yes! Wherever You lead and whatever the cost,

I'm ready. Anytime. Anywhere. Anyway. Whatever it takes, Lord; whatever it takes! I want to be used by You in such a way, that on that final day I'll hear You say, "Well done, my good and faithful servant! Come and share in Your master's happiness!"

May it be so! —Amen

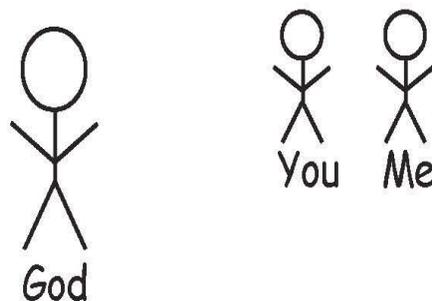
Big Question

Do you know for sure that you're going to Heaven?

If not, please take a look at God's Plan of Salvation as outlined below:

The Bible tells you how you can know for sure that you would spend eternity in Heaven:

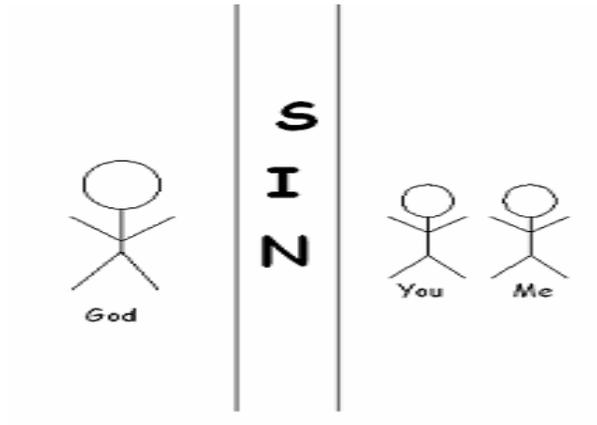
You see, God loves you and created you to have a relationship with Him. Even before you were born He loved you and had great plans for your life.



The Bible says, "*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son [Jesus] that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life*" (John 3:16).

(Turn the page...)

But we have a problem called “sin.” Sin is anything we do that’s wrong. Picture sin as a Grand Canyon or a great wall that separates us from God. God is perfect—He’s never done anything wrong, so He’s on one side. But we’re not perfect, and because we’ve all done wrong things, our sin has separated from God.

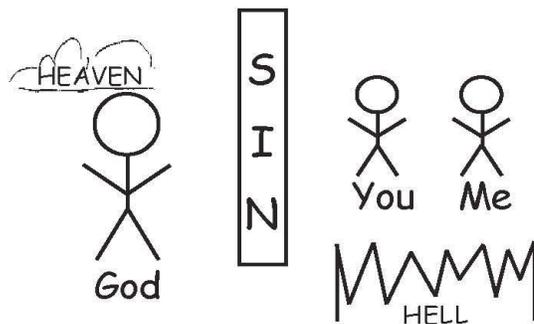


The Bible says, “*For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God*”(Romans 3:23).

(Turn the page...)

But there's more... You see, sin has a punishment. It's a place called Hell, but God doesn't want you to go there. The Bible says that God created Hell as the punishment for the devil and the other angels that rebelled against Him, but when we did wrong things,

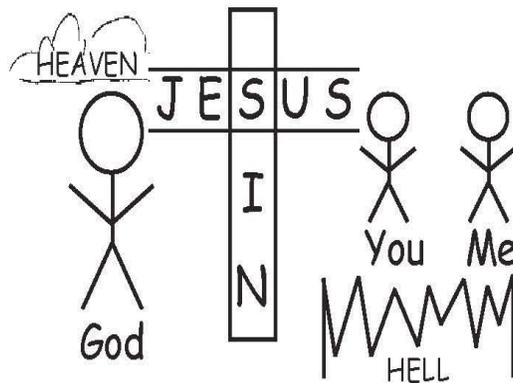
Hell became our punishment too. And Hell isn't just the punishment for *really* bad things—One sin, no matter how small, even the littlest of lies, is enough to keep a person out of Heaven.



The Bible says, *“For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord”*(Romans 6:23).

(Turn the page...)

God has a gift for you: it's Heaven. God wants you to go to Heaven. It doesn't matter what you've said or done—it doesn't matter how bad you've been, God still loves you. But just because He wants us to go to Heaven, doesn't mean that we automatically will. We have to make a choice, but this is what God did: Jesus was God and came to earth as a man. He lived a perfect life, and when He died on the cross, God punished Him for all the wrong things you and I would ever do. This is how much God loves you and this is the reason Jesus came—to make a way for you to go to Heaven. If sin is the gulf that separates us from God, Jesus built a bridge across it by dying and paying the price for your sins. But Jesus didn't stay dead. Three days later God raised Him from the dead and He's alive today. That's why He's the only way to go to Heaven.



The Bible says, “*But God showed his love for us, in that, while we were yet sinners*

Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).

The Bible says, “*Jesus said, ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life; no man comes to the*

Father except through me’” (John 14:6).

(Turn the page...)

Think About It

Let's say someone offers you a million dollars. Is it yours yet? What would you have to do to get it?

Like a gift, you can accept it, or you can say no. A gift can't be earned, just like Heaven—you can't be good enough to get into Heaven. There is only one way across that Grand Canyon of sin and that's Jesus.

Now it would be easy to take a million dollars, it—all you have to do is reach out and it's yours. With God's gift it's a little different. You can't physically reach out and take it, but in the Bible God tells you that there's only one way you can accept this gift of salvation and Heaven: By giving your life to Jesus Christ.

Jesus has already paid the price for your sins, but in order for you to give your life to Him, you have to:

Admit that you have sinned and be willing to turn from your sin.

Believe that Jesus is God's Son who died and was raised from the dead.

Call on the Lord, confess your sins, and commit your life to Him.

The Bible says, "*That if you will confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved*" (Romans 10:9).

The Bible also says, "*For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved*" (Romans 10:13).

(Turn the page...)

Does all this make sense to you?

Would you like to give your life to Christ right now?

If you are willing to accept Jesus as the Savior and Lord of your life, please pray this prayer but realize that repeating a prayer can't get you into Heaven. Words can't "save" you. You have to mean what you say. You have to be willing to make Jesus the Lord and boss of your life. God knows what's in your heart, so if you're willing to give your life to Christ, please pray this aloud after me but don't say it to me. Say it to Jesus:

Dear Jesus,

Thank you for dying for me and offering me Heaven. I'm sorry for the wrong things I've done. Please come into my life and be my Lord and Savior. I give you my life and I surrender myself to you. Thank you for saving me.

In Jesus Name, Amen.

(Turn the page...)

Congratulations!

If you just gave your life to Jesus, know that you've just made the greatest decision of your life. The Bible promises that if you are willing to commit your life to Christ, He will save you and give you a brand new life. All the wrong things you've ever done have been wiped away. You're forgiven and the Lord has given you a new beginning with

Jesus as your Savior and God as your Heavenly Father.

The Bible says, "*Yet to all who received him [Jesus], to those who believed in his name,*

he gave the right to become children of God" (John 1:12).

We want to encourage you to begin growing in your new relationship with Christ:

- Find a Bible-believing, Christian church and tell the minister that you have prayed to receive Jesus as your Lord and Savior.
- Begin praying and talking to Jesus as your friend—tell Him about anything in your life.
 - Start reading the Bible in the Gospel of John to get to know Jesus better.
 - Tell your friends and family about the decision that you've made.
- Follow Jesus in baptism, which is a public statement and symbol that you've given your life to Christ.
- Become actively involved in church where people can support you, teach you, and encourage you as you begin the most wonderful relationship you'll ever have—a friendship with God Himself.

Author's Note

As I stated at the beginning of this story, this is a work of fiction and not a theological treatise concerning what Hell is really like. There are many things about both Heaven and Hell that God has not told us. However, the Bible is very clear that both Heaven and Hell are real. The purpose of this story is to make you think, to help draw you into a deeper concern for eternal matters and for encouraging you to become eternally-minded in the way you live your life and the witness you share with others.

If you desire to know more about Hell and how the Bible describes it, then please use the following pattern of Biblical study:

- (2) Ask God to direct and bless your study and affirm, even before beginning, that you will believe whatever you find in His Word, regardless of whether or not it lines up with what you already believe. Bible study is about taking God's Word for what it says; not trying to make it fit into a pattern of belief that you already have.
- (3) Begin by looking up every verse in the Bible about Hell or Hades. Read these. Then re-read them. There won't be as many of these as you might think. Remember, the purpose here is not just to have read them all, but to gain the understanding of what they say. The easiest way to perform a study like this is to use a concordance and to simply look up "Hell", "Hades" and "fire. These will cover most of the references on Hell. In your Bible you will want to turn to these Scriptures passages so that you can also read the verses before and after to help you understand their context. A Bible software commentary can help with this also or you can use a free online resource such as www.searchgodsword.org.

APPENDIX

Four Calls for the Soul Winner

Sermon by Jack Hyles

(Preached at the National Sword of the Lord Conference in Indianapolis, 1974. ³)

Standing in judgment, the Apostle Paul declared, “I was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision.”

When told not to preach anymore in His name in the book of Acts, Peter and John replied, “We cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard.”

The writer of Hebrews said, “Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses...”

In chapter 16 of Acts, the story is told about the Apostle Paul and his second missionary journey, when he heard the voice from Macedonia saying, “Come over into Macedonia, and help us.”

Then in chapter 16 of Luke is the story of the rich man who, when he had been refused the privilege of being delivered from the fires of torment, suggested to Abraham that he send Lazarus to tell his five brothers how to be saved lest they too ‘come to this awful place of torment.’”

Now we will tie these passages together.

Fifteen years ago this month I became pastor of the First Baptist Church of Hammond, Indiana...Shortly after—maybe two months—one of the wealthier members of the church came to me and said, “Pastor, could I have a conference with you, please?”

He called me off to the side and he said something like this:

Pastor, I am one of the most influential members of this church. I have been a member for years. I want to tell you something, Pastor. Ever since you have been here, I have been nervous. Look at me! I am trembling right now! Before you came we used to have revival meetings once or twice a year. We would hire an evangelist to come in and preach evangelistic sermons. But, now for these months since you have become pastor, it is like that every Sunday. Every Sunday morning it is soul winning. Every Sunday night it is soul winning. Monday it is soul winning. Tuesday it is soul winning. Wednesday it is soul winning. Thursday it is soul winning. Friday it is soul winning. Saturday it is soul winning.

Pastor, look at me. I am a nervous wreck. Our people were calm and tranquil before you came, but you have made half of this church nervous wrecks.

Pastor, do you know that last Sunday morning we sang fifty-three stanzas of “Just as I am, without one plea, But that thy blood was shed for me”? We sang the song ten times all the way through during the invitation, and three stanzas over that.

Pastor, do you know that last Sunday morning my neighbor across the street who goes to the Lutheran church went to Sunday school, stayed for church, came home, changed clothes, ate lunch, read the paper, watched part of the ball game, took a nap and woke up just as I was getting home from our Sunday morning service?

Pastor, why, why, why can't you be like other preachers in town? Why is it the pressure has got to be on every Sunday morning and every Sunday night? And even when we are not in church, somebody is trying to go out and get somebody so they can bring them down the aisle the next time we have a service.

Pastor, I stood on one foot; then I stood on the other foot. I thought you would never get through with the invitation! Why, why can't you be like the other preachers?

I said, “Come next Sunday night, and I will give you my answer.”

The next Sunday I told my people this man’s story, not calling his name. I just said, “A man has come to me representing others who are nervous, and they have asked me why this pressure is on all the time, why Sunday morning, Sunday night, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday and starting again the next Sunday morning again, the pressure is on—all the time. ‘It is soul winning, soul winning, soul winning; evangelism, evangelism, evangelism,’ he complained”

Tonight I will tell you why, as I told them why. There are four reasons.

I. A CALL FROM WITHIN

In the first place, there is a call from within. Something inside me says it has got to be that way. There is a call from within. Something inside me speaks like the apostle spoke when he said, “I cannot be disobedient to the heavenly vision.” Maybe it is sort of like the woman at Sychar’s well who went back into the city and said, “Hey! Come see a man who told me all the things I ever did.” Or maybe it is like Peter and John who said, “Sir, we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard.”

That is exactly what I am praying for God to burn in the bosom of every preacher who has been here this week. It is not, “What kind of church will I have?” but, “What kind of church I *must* have.” It is not, “What kind of church will I choose?” but I trust that God will set a burning in the soul of every preacher who is here this week so that he will have to have an old-fashioned, soul-winning church when he goes back home. A call from within.

It has not always been that way. This call from within started when I was an older teenager. Anyone who has heard me preach knows this is true. I was an introvert when I was a boy. I was still sucking my thumb when I was fourteen. On my 17th birthday I weighed 93 pounds dripping wet and full of bananas. I could not pass public speaking. I was called “Jackie boy.” Nobody took me seriously. When God called me to preach, the angels wept and Heaven’s flag was flown at half-mast for three days!

One day when I was an older teenager, the chairman of our deacon board, Jesse Cobb, met me after the service on a Sunday morning in the back of the auditorium. Jesse was the best lay soul winning I think I ever met. He said, “Jack, will you do something with me this afternoon?”

“What, Jesse?”

“Will you go soul winning with me this afternoon?”

“Jesse, you know better than that! You know I am a timid introvert. I would not know what to say if I went out soul winning. Jesse, I couldn’t do it.”

“Jack, I will make you a deal. All you will have to do is to just listen.”

Well, since I had a Ph.D. in listening, I said, “Now, let us get this straight. You talk, I listen.”

He said, “Well, you may have to say hello.”

I said, “I think I can do that.”

So that afternoon for the first time in my life, I went soul winning.

Jesse Cobb and I knocked on a door. A big high school football player, tackle on the Adamson High School football team named Kenneth Florence, came to the door.

Kenneth looked down at Jesse and at me. Jesse looked up to Kenneth and said, “Kenneth Florence?”

“Yes, sir.”

“My name is Jesse Cobb.”

“How do you do, sir?”

“And this is Jack Hyles.”

I generated all the extraversion at my disposal and I said, “Hello.”

“Kenneth, Jack here wants to say a few words to you.”

Stuttering, I said, “Kenneth, will you go to church tonight?”

Jesse said Kenneth said, “Yes, I will.”

And I said, “You will?”

Kenneth said, “Yes, I will.”

I said, “I will come back and get you as seven o’clock tonight.”

At seven o’clock that night I went by to get Kenneth Florence. For the first time in my life I knew that God had given me a soul I had to win. I didn’t know one single Scripture of the Roman Road. I had never taken a soul-winning course. I had no idea in this world what to do.

The sermon was finished. I put my arm around Kenneth’s big, broad shoulders and said, “Kenneth, would...would...wouldn’t you like to be saved?”

He said, “Yes, I would.”

I said, “I can’t tell you how, but if you will come with me, the preacher can. Follow me.”

We went down this aisle. The pastor met me. I said, “Pastor, Kenneth wants to be saved.” I then turned and walked away. I got about two rows back, and the pastor said, “Hold it, Jack. Kenneth, Jack here wants to kneel and show you how to be saved.” No, Jack didn’t!

But I knelt and put my arms around Kenneth’s big, broad shoulders and said, “Kenneth, I do not know how to tell you how to be saved. John 3:16 says something like this: Jesus died for you because God loved you and gave Himself for you. Now, I believe that if you would be willing to ask God to forgive you and trust Him as your Savior, God would save you tonight.”

Thank God, somebody had already told Kenneth how to be saved. So Kenneth Florence bowed his head, and on his knees he began to pray something like this: “Father, thank you that this fellow is interested in me. I know I am a sinner. I know Jesus died for me, and I know that You, God, can save me, and I do now trust You as my Savior.”

I said, “Kenneth, if you meant that, put your hand in mine.”

Kenneth put his hand in mine. While he was praying, something turned loose inside my soul! I tell you, the fireworks of Heaven began to ignite! The lightning flashed, the thunder rolled, the sparklers began to sparkle as I realized that here was something I could do. I couldn’t make the football team, but I could point a person to heaven. I couldn’t make the senior play, but I could point a person to Heaven. I couldn’t get a date, but I could point a person to Heaven. I couldn’t make the basketball team (I did make the team, but because my legs were so skinny, people laughed at me, and I would not go on the floor); but I could point a person to Heaven.

I got off my knees and said, “Dear God, this is something a little introvert can do. This is something ‘Jackie boy’ can do.”

There is not a man or woman or a boy or a girl in this house tonight who can’t point someone to Jesus Christ. You may not be able to be a Congressman like our brother here, but you can be a soul winner. You may not be able to be the editor of *The Sword of the Lord* like John Rice, but you can be a soul winner. Perhaps you could not pastor the largest Sunday school in the world, but you could be a soul winner.

I am saying, there was call in my breast, a call from within! I am praying that God tonight will give you that call, burning in your soul and you will leave this place determined to be a soul winner.

Pastor, could I have a conference with you, please? I represent quite a few people in this church who are nervous. Look at my hands. I am nervous. I have been nervous ever since you came. You see, Pastor, before you came, we had revival meetings twice a year, sometimes once or twice a year. We hired a singer, we hired a preacher, and we had evangelistic services. But ever since you have come, Pastor, it has been soul winning on Sunday morning, soul winning on Sunday night, soul winning on Monday, soul winning on Tuesday, soul winning on Wednesday, soul winning on Thursday, soul winning on Friday, soul winning on Saturday.

Why, Pastor, last Sunday morning we sang fifty-three stanzas of “Just as I Am, Without One Plea.” Do you know that my Lutheran neighbor across the street went to Sunday school, stayed for church, came home, changed clothes, ate lunch, read the paper, watched part of the ball game, took a nap and woke up about the time I came home from our services Sunday morning? Why can’t you be like other preachers?

And I gave my people a second reason why I can't be normal. Vance Havner has always said, "About all the Christians are so sub-normal that if anybody gets normal, everybody thinks he is abnormal."

II. A CALL FROM WITHOUT

Not only is there a call from within, but there is a call from without. "Come over into Macedonia, and help us." How can you drive down the streets of Indianapolis without hearing people calling you to be a soul winner?

Listen, there are tens of thousands of people in this city and in mine who have never one time heard the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Walk down the streets of Indianapolis and ask, "What do you have to do to go to Heaven?" Most will answer, "Well, I live a pretty good life," or, "I have been confirmed."

(Let me make a parenthesis. It does not matter how many times you have been baptized, confirmed, sprinkled or dipped or how many times you have turned over a new leaf or how many good deeds you have done, if you are not born again, you will never go to Heaven as long as this world lives or eternity lasts.)

There is a call from without. I believe this Book. I believe that everybody without Christ is lost. I believe that lost men go to Hell when they die. I believe that men who go to Hell burn forever and ever and ever and ever in the fires of torment. Because of that, there is a constant call from without.

That call began in me when I was a young preacher. I had preached for a year without having anybody saved. I will not go into the experience that took place and what caused

this to happen, but God changed my life and filled me with the Holy Spirit. The next Sunday night when I came back to my country pulpit, three people got saved all at one time. I had never had anybody saved before. But we had three saved that night—three, three! Hallelujah! Three! I never thought I would see three people saved at one time.

Now, where I grew up in Texas, we used to shake hands with all the converts. When these three people got saved, a deacon made a motion that they be accepted after baptism, a second was made to the motion, and we voted them in the church, shook their hands and dismissed the service.

I was standing at the altar, saying, “Hallelujah! Praise the Lord!” You see, I have a Baptist head but a Pentecostal heart and Jehovah’s Witness’ feet. And my Pentecostal heart got happy. I was saying, “Praise the Lord! Amen! Three people came and got saved!”

All of a sudden—wham! A great big fellow hit me from the rear. He was a trainman for the T.& P. Railway Company. He draped all over me and said, “Reverend, this is a wonderful service! My daughter Barbara is back in the corner leaning up against the wall. I believe if you would go talk to her, you could get her to be saved.”

I went and told Barbara how to be saved, and she got saved. I went out on the front porch, called the folks back in, and we voted Barbara into the church. We came by to shake Barbara’s hand, and then we dismissed the service. Praise the Lord! We had four people saved that night!

I was standing beside Barbara, and I was clapping my hands and saying, Praise the Lord! Amen! Hallelujah!” when all of a sudden—wham! The same fellow hit me from

the rear. Crying, he said, “Reverend, my married daughter, Dorothy Hall, is back there in that corner. I believe you would get her saved if you would go back there and talk to her.”

I went back and told Dorothy how to be saved, and she got saved! I went out on the porch. “Hey! Come on back in! Come back in!” We voted Dorothy into the church, and we came by to shake her hand and then dismissed the service. Hallelujah! Praise the Lord! Five people got saved at one time in one service. I never thought I would see that!

I was saying, “Amen! Praise the Lord!” when all of a sudden—wham! The same fellow draped himself all over me and said, “Reverend, Dorothy’s husband, Sam Hall, is on the front porch. He just threw down his cigarette. Do you reckon that means anything?”

I went out on the front porch and said, “Sam, did you throw your cigarette down?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Why?”

“I am about to die! I have got to get saved!” I told Sam Hall how to be saved on the front porch of that church. “Hey! Come on back here! Come on back in.” We voted Sam into the church and came by to shake his hand and then dismissed the service.

You will not believe this, but it is true! I was standing at the altar beside Sam, praising the Lord that six people had been saved, when all of a sudden—wham! That same fellow draped himself all over me, and here is what he said: “Reverend, I think I will get saved myself before I go home!”

I knelt at the altar and told that man how to be saved. (He, today, is a lay preacher.) And he got saved. I went out on the front porch. “HEY! Come on back in.” Some of them

came back in, and we voted him into the church, came by to shake his hand and then again dismissed the service.

At 11:15 that night I went on over to the parsonage. I got on my face before God and I said, “O God, this is what I have been wanting all these years! O God, I am going to die! I am not going to be a powerless preacher. I am not going to be just a ‘Reverend.’ I am not going to have just a worship service on Sunday morning. We are going to have the kind of service where the Holy Ghost comes and the power of God comes and people get saved! I am not going to be just a powerless preacher!”

And blessed be God, through these years, I wish I could tell you how God has answered that prayer.

Becky, married to a preacher, is almost twenty-three. David is twenty. Linda is seventeen, and Cindy is almost fifteen. Not one of my children who lives at our house has ever been to church on Sunday without seeing somebody saved. Until she left our house, only two Sundays since Beck was born did she ever go to church without seeing her daddy baptize sometime on Sunday.

My preacher brothers, you do not have to have a powerless ministry! There is something better than these dry halls and dead services and worship services and sevenfold Amens and Gloria Patrias and Amen, Amen, Amen! There is an old-fashioned, Holy Ghost kind of Christianity.

Talk about our need in America! If we have America saved, it will be saved because God raises up a generation of old-fashioned, Hell-fire-and-damnation, Bible-preaching, soul-winning, Christ-honoring, God-fearing, sin-hating, sin-fighting preachers who dare to preach it like it is!

This man said to me, “Pastor, why, why?”

I said, “Because there is a call from within and there is a call from without.”

Pastor, could I talk with you for a few minutes, please? We like you here. We think you are honest. We think you are a fine man. But I represent a nervous group of people. You see, Pastor, before you came we used to have revival—the evangelist, the singer and all the trimmings. But ever since you have come—soul winning on Sunday morning, soul winning on Sunday night, soul winning on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday. Pastor, you have got a church of nervous people.

Do you know what we did last Sunday after the sermon? We sang fifty-three stanzas of “Just as I Am, Without One Plea.” And that is not all, Pastor. My neighbor across the street is a Lutheran. He went to Sunday school, he stayed for church, came home, changed clothes, read the paper, watched part of the ball game, took a nap and woke up about the time I was coming home from our church service Sunday morning. Now, why can’t you be like other preachers? Why? Why can’t you?

III. A CALL FROM ABOVE

I said to my people. There is a third reason why. As long as I pastor the First Baptist Church of Hammond, Indiana, it will not be a formal kind of a ritualistic church. It will not be a dead kind of dry service. It will be a place where we can weep over every erring one, lift up the fallen, tell them of Jesus, the power to save. We are going to have old-fashioned Christianity because there is a call from above. From above.

Jesus my Savior is in Heaven, and He told me to go and preach the Gospel to every creature. But that is not all. The Bible says that there is a cloud of witnesses watching over us, watching all we do. Those clouds of witnesses tell us to go.

I have two little sisters in Heaven whose faces I have never seen. Each died at the age of seven. They are buried side by side in the little grave in Italy, Texas, not far from my father's grave. For these almost thirty years that I have been preaching, though I have never seen them, they have seen me. I think they look down at me tonight and say, "Jack, tell them to go soul winning. Tell them to go soul winning."

There is a call from above. Oh, the great host of people I have sent to Heaven through these years! They want us to go soul winning. *You* may not be for soul winning, but those in Heaven are for soul winning. The Bible says there is more joy in the presence of the angels over one sinner that repenteth, than over ninety and nine just persons that need no repentance. And all across this nation tonight, churches have deacons, committee members, board members, finance committee members who are trying to water down and soften the Hell-fire-and-brimstone, soul-winning pastors and to vote them out.

As I stand before God, I would rather be a homosexual than to be a man who tries to water down old-fashioned, soul-winning, New Testament Christianity. There is a call from above. God wants us to go soul winning!

I believe we need some help in politics. But that won't save America. I think we ought to make it against the law for communists to be allowed to speak on campuses and spread their filth of revolution to our boys and girls whom we have sent to college. But after it is all said and done, we will clean the colleges up when we will clean the pulpit up. As long as we have people who are afraid in the pulpit, we will have people

intimidating us in the pew. As long as we have polar bears in the pulpit, we will have ice cubes in the pews. We have to have some men of God who have a call from above who say, “We are going to spend our lives trying to reach the souls of men.”

When I was a kid preacher pastoring a growing church in Garland, Texas, there came to our services on Sunday morning a little man. He said he was seventy-two. He had a squeaky voice, his hair was white, and he had stooped shoulders. In his broken voice he said, “Young man, could you tell me where the pastor is?”

“I am the pastor.”

“You? I thought it would be an older man.”

I said, “I am Brother Hyles.”

“Brother Hyles, my name is Jesse W. Moore. I am a Baptist preacher. The reason I talk like this is because when I preached, I really preached. I didn’t pussyfoot nor compromise; I let ‘er rip! I have preached my voice out for over fifty years. Now I am sick, and I have had to quit preaching. They sent me here to Garland, Texas, and I am just wondering if you would let me come to your church. I would not cause trouble. I would be for you every time you preach.”

“Sure, you can come. You are welcome.”

I bought him an old-fashioned platform rocker and put it next to the wall in the altar. And old Brother Moore would sit over there and rock and clap his hands while I preached. He had a Pentecostal heart, too! He would say, “Hallelujah! Amen! Praise the Lord!” He knew Billy Sunday personally. He had also known Mel Trotter, Paul Radar and other great preachers in an intimate, personal relationship.

I would preach on Sunday mornings, then go stand at the front door. Then I baptized only on Sunday nights. Old Brother Moore would come out. He always had a stubble beard, about a quarter of an inch long. He would say, “That was a good sermon, Paul.”

“Paul? My name is Jack.”

“Oh, I thought you were Paul Radar there for awhile, the way you was preaching.”

Then I would say, “Boy, you sure know good preaching when you hear it!” Then I would hug him, and we would laugh, and I would kiss him on the cheek.

Next Sunday morning he would come out and say, “That was a good sermon there, Billy.”

“Billy? I am Jack.”

“Oh, I thought you was Billy Sunday there this morning.”

“Thank you! Thank you!”

And every Monday morning old Brother Moore would come by my office at nine o'clock. He would pace the floor. “Brother Jack, I just came by this morning to tell you about a stupid mistake I made when I was a kid preacher.”

Strangely enough it was always the same mistake I had made the day before! But he never told me it was *my* mistake. It was always *his*. I would say, “You are coming through loud and clear, Brother Moore.”

“Now I am not be critical. I just wanted to tell you how stupid I used to be.”

“Oh, no, no, no, no.” I would kiss his cheek and hug him, and he would go his way.

Several months passed. He did not come to sit in his seat. It was empty. I missed his “Amen! Hallelujah.” This corner was strangely quiet.

After a hard Sunday and near midnight, the telephone rang. A female voice said, “Is this Reverend Hyles?”

“This is Brother Hyles.”

“An old man down here is dying. He has white hair, stooped shoulder. There is no identification on him, no one that he can call. No one knows who he is. All he keeps saying is, “Call Brother Jack. Call Brother Jack.” Somebody here knew that you liked to be called “Brother” instead of Reverend, and your first name is Jack. We thought you might know who this man is.”

“Of course I know him.”

I walked into Room 11 of the little hospital, and there was Brother Moore. I was a young preacher, so I wore a black suit, black shoes, black tie and carried a black Bible.

I walked in to say, “May the Lord comfort you in the valley of the shadow of death.” I had never seen many folks die before. But when I walked in, Brother Moore looked up at me, and the nurse said, “He is dying, so be careful what you say.”

When he saw me he said, “Come in, Brother Jack. Ha! Ha! Ha! I am just about to take a trip. Ha! Ha! Ha! I have been looking forward to it all these years. Ha! Ha! Ha! Guess what, Brother Jack! Any minute now, I am going to see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and John the Baptist and Paul and Peter and JESUS! Is there anything you want me to tell them for you?”

To save my life, I could not think of anything except, “Tell them, ‘Hi’”!

He said, “Brother Jack...” Then he began to breathe heavily as if it were his last breath. He took the oxygen mask off his face, laid it down on the bed beside him, reached out and asked for my hand. As I put both of my hands in his right hand, he covered my

hands with his left. I could not feel a pulse, and his hands were cold. He looked up at me as if he had planned it this way and he said, “Brother Jack! Keep preaching it!” He placed his right hand over his heart and made a cross with his left. His chin sunk against his breast. His eyes were opened in death.

I heard the rustling of the wings of angels. And one angel came and said, “Reverend, would you step out in the hall, please? We have a job to do.”

I stepped out in the hall and heard the rustling of angels’ wings as they took the spirit of that great giant of God and laid it in the presence of the One whom he had preached for over half a century and the One whom, bless God, we will see any day now!

I went back in the room and prayed, “O God, I pray that, as long as I have breath to breathe, You will help me keep preaching it!”

Oh, tonight, while I am preaching to you, I believe up there, in a pure gold platform rocker, a little old fellow with white hair, straight shoulders and a face as smooth as the face of his Savior is saying, “Amen! Amen! Hallelujah!”

“Why, Preacher, why?” I will tell you why! Heaven wants our churches to be soul-winning churches.

Pastor, could I have a talk with you, please? I represent a nervous committee of our church. Pastor, why can’t you be like other preachers? Why can’t our services be more ritualistic and dignified on Sunday morning? Why, Pastor, ever since you have been here, it has been revival meetings Sunday morning, Sunday night, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday.

Do you know that we sang fifty-three stanzas of “Just as I Am, Without One Plea” last Sunday morning, and my Lutheran neighbor across the street went to Sunday school, he

stayed for church, came home, changed clothes, ate lunch, read the paper, watched part of the ball game, took a nap and woke up about the time I was getting home from my morning service? Why can't you be like other preachers?

IV. A CALL FROM BENEATH

I told my people the next Sunday night, “The fourth reason that I cannot is that there is a call from beneath.” A call from within! A call from without! A call from above! And a call from beneath!

You recall the story of...the rich man who died and went to Hell. He lifted up his eyes and said, “Father Abraham, send Lazarus that he may dip his finger in water, and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.” Abraham told him there is a great gulf between them, and it was impossible. He said, “Then tell Lazarus to go back and tell my five brothers not to come here where I am!”

You may not be interested in soul winning, but in Hell they are! There is a call from beneath tonight.

And now may I get very serious for a few minutes and enter into the little white sanctuary where I don't like to go but where I must take you in the closing moment of this message?

My father was an alcoholic. He is buried tonight in a drunkard's grave in Italy, Texas. My father heard me preach two sermons, one on Sunday morning and one on Sunday night, New Year's Day, 1949.

New Year's Eve I got burdened for my dad. So I got in my car in Marshall, Texas, and drove 150 miles to Dallas to the Hunt Saloon where my dad was a bartender and a

drunk...My dad was sitting at the bar drinking beer. He was a big man, weighing 235 pounds, and the strongest man I ever knew.

I said, “Dad, this is Saturday night, New Year’s Eve, 1949. I am going to take you back today to Marshall, Texas, to hear me preach tomorrow.”

My dad cursed me. “I’m not going to go and hear any preacher preach.”

“Dad, you weigh 235 pounds, and I weigh a little over half that. But we are going to have a brawl here in this bar, or you are going to go with me to Marshall, Texas.”

He realized that I meant business. I gave him enough coffee to sober him up a bit; then we got in the car and I took him to Marshall, Texas. On New Year’s Eve, 1949, my father went on our watch night service with us. We got on buses and rode around town and sang songs and had a wonderful time. We came back to church and prayed the old year out and the new year in.

Sunday was on New Year’s Day that year. I stood to preach, and my dad sat on the fourth row from the front. The invitation time came, and he clawed the pew in conviction. I pleaded for him to come, but he would not.

That afternoon we went for a walk out in the pasture. I put my arms around his shoulder and said, “Dad, I want to see you be a Christian more than I want anything in the world. Dad, will you not be saved?”

My dad opened the joybells of Heaven when he said, “Son, I am going to get saved. I am going to go back to Dallas and sell out. I am *going* to move to Marshall. I am going to buy me a little fruit stand or a small grocery store and set up a little business here. I am going to get saved in the spring and let you baptize me.”

I said, “Dad, that is wonderful! That is good enough for me.”

I wish I could relive that afternoon. I wish I had a chance to try again. I thought he had plenty of time. He was only 62. I clapped my hands. The last word my dad said when he got out of the car on Washington Street in Dallas, Texas, was, “Son, I am going to let you baptize me in the spring.”

Every time I baptized that winter, I heard him say, “Son, I am going to let you baptize me in the spring.”

On May 3, 1950, about ten o’clock in the morning, my telephone rang. The operator said, “Reverend Jack Hyles?”

“This is Brother Hyles.”

“Go ahead, sir.”

A man’s voice said, “My name is Smith. Reverend Hyles, I worked with your dad. We hung dry wall together. He was up on a sawhorse this morning hanging dry wall on the ceiling, and he just a few minutes ago dropped dead with a heart attack.”

I didn’t say anything. I just put the phone down.

“Son, I am going to let you baptize me in the spring.”

I got in my car and drove back to Dallas, Texas, to the O’Neil Funeral Home.

My dad was buried in Italy, Texas.

Several months passed. One Sunday night past midnight there came a knock on the door of my study. I went to the door, and my only sister was at the door weeping.

“Earlyne, is it Mother?”

“No, Jack. Would you tell me how to be saved?”

“Sure I will.” And I told my only sister how to be saved, and she was saved in my study about one o’clock in the morning.

After she got saved I said, “Earlyne, why tonight? You could have been saved anytime through these years. Why did you choose tonight, and why did you come so late at night to get saved?”

She said, “Jack, you know that I was daddy’s pet.”

“That is right.”

“Daddy did not care much for you, Jack, but he loved me very much.”

“That is right, Sister.”

“Jack, when dad died, I thought I would die too. I couldn’t sleep at night. I lost weight. I cried almost every waking hour. I had a dream shortly after he died. I dreamed that I was taken into a big building, about like this, by a heavenly creature up to the second floor of that building. I was taken to a corner. There I saw a casket. I looked in. The corpse had a look of peace on its face. There was a casket next to that. In that casket was a corpse. That corpse had a look of peace on its face. And the next and the next and the next. The entire wall was lined with caskets, and in each was a corpse. And on each face a look of peace. The same thing across that wall and across this wall.”

She said, “Jack, we got to the last casket, and the heavenly creature said, “You can’t look in that one.”

“I said, ‘I must. I have to look at all of them.’ The creature said, ‘No, you can’t look in that one.’”

She said, “Jack, I saw two hands raise themselves above the casket. They were daddy’s hands. Jack, daddy was saying, ‘Sister! Sister! Sister!’

“I broke away from the creature and went over and looked in daddy’s face. Jack, his face was writhing in pain, and daddy was saying. ‘Sister! Sister! I—I—I—ju—j—bu—

bu—I—I—Sister, Sister!’ I said, ‘Daddy, what is it? Tell me!’ He said, ‘Sister, Sister!,
I—I—I—eh—B—je—je—be—, Sister, Sister!’”

She said, “Jack, the creature took me then, but I knew what daddy was saying. When I heard you preach tonight on the rich man in Hell who said to go tell my five brothers not to come here, I knew that daddy was telling me not to come to Hell where he was.”

And now for these twenty-four and a half years, the thing that has motivated my life and my ministry has been the fact that somewhere in the torments of the unprepared, my daddy says, “Jack, tell them *all* not to come here. Tell them *all!* Tell them *all!* Tell them *all!*”

Pastor, could I talk with you, please? I represent a bunch of nervous people. Why can't you be like other preachers?

I will tell you why. I will tell you why.

“K—K—K—enneth, w—w—wouldn't you like to be saved?”

“I think I'll get saved myself before I go home.”

“Brother, Jack, ke—ke—ke—eep preaching it!”

“Sister, Sister! I—I—eh—eh—b—b—bje—je, oh, Sister!”

That is why!

Would you bow your heads for prayer, please? ³

APPENDIX

Jesus Told a Story...

Reflect

There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores. The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him, "Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire." But Abraham replied, "Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us." He answered, "Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father's house, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment." Abraham replied, "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them." "No, father Abraham," he said, "but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent." He said to him, "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."

Luke 16:19-31

Endnotes

¹Leonard Ravenhill. *Why Revival Tarries*, (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1959), p. 32.

²W. B. Riley, “Six Essentials in Soul Winning,” Hudson, Curtis, ed. *Great Preaching on Soul Winning*, (Murfreesboro, TN: Sword of the Lord Publishers, 1989), p. 204-5.

³Hyles, Jack, “Four Calls for Soul Winning,” [1974], Hudson, Curtis, ed. . *Great Preaching on Soul Winning*, (Murfreesboro, TN: Sword of the Lord Publishers, 1989), p. 41-57. Used by permission.