

# **All the Stillness of the Wind**

***Donald James Parker***

**Sword of the Spirit Publishing**

This is a work of fiction. The events and characters described here are imaginary and not intended to reflect any actual person, living or dead. The authors mentioned in the story are real people as were John Baker and Samuel Morris.

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Sword of the Spirit Publishing  
[www.swordofspirit.net](http://www.swordofspirit.net)

ISBN 13: 978-0-6152-0810-7

## Acknowledgements

First of all a big thanks to Boyd Deering who provided the awesome photograph for the front cover. You can check out his work at [www.boyddeering.net](http://www.boyddeering.net), <http://cdbaby.com/cd/bbbwba> and <http://cdbaby.com/cd/bdeering>

Thanks to my friends from Fanstory, Veronica Mello has been with me all the way from the start, providing much encouragement and support. Shirla White has also been with me from the beginning, sharing her gentle spirit and feedback with me through the process. Cheri Jalbert has graced me with time away from her novel, which I believe has the potential to be a blockbuster. Her insight and wisdom have given me a new perspective on my work.

William Terry (Buctar) has been my mentor and shared with me many of the nuances of the craft of writing. Check out his fantasy story *Book of Spells* coming out in the summer of 2008.

Dante Longo II has been instrumental in bringing this book to the public, offering relevant doses of editorial advice and encouragement.

Charlie McMahon went through my final version and found all those little mistakes that escaped my notice through multiple passes.

A big thanks to Randall Niles, author of *Reflections of a Journey: What Happened To Me*, which is referenced in this story. Randall took the same journey that Jeremy did.

Thanks to Dave Schmelzer, who allowed me to use a portion of his conversion story. Dave is writing a book about that experience. It will be called *Good God* and will be out in 2008.

And the movie John Baker's last race truly has influenced my life. You can buy it at <http://creativeworks.byu.edu/Catalog/ViewItem.aspx?item=TM014>



## Chapter 1

### The Mysteries of Life

This was a critical possession for the Spartans, who trailed by one point with less than two minutes to play. Jeremy dribbled the basketball behind his back, eluded the man guarding him, and drove to the hoop. Just as he was about to shoot, he caught a glimpse of the seven-foot center from Auburn dropping off his man and towering behind his own six-foot-two frame like a redwood tree. *I've entered No Man's Land.* There was no one to pass to, he was standing with a foot in the lane, giving him three seconds to shoot or get out, and King Kong was ready to cram the ball down his throat if he took the shot.

Jeremy thought fast. He'd practiced a trick shot on many occasions but never found the opportunity to use it in a game. This seemed to be the perfect place. His rear end arched and made contact with the taller defender behind him to get some space.

The big man was poised to make his leap if Jeremy went up in the air or brought the ball up to shoot. Neither happened. Shooting the ball underhanded with his wrists from his waist, Jeremy flicked the ball up and out at the bang board. The defender had no clue a shot was going up until it was too late, and he could only watch in helplessness as it entered the magical square of the glass and caromed through the net. The Sumner crowd went crazy. They now held a one-point lead over the number one team in Washington.

Auburn called a time-out and both teams raced to the sidelines to consult with their respective coaches. The Spartan coach knelt in the circle of his players. "OK, guys, drop back into a two-three zone and deny the pass to the big guy. We don't want him getting an easy one in close. If a shot goes up, make sure you box out. We can't afford to give up any second chance points here. I want the offside guard sagging to the middle. The other guard has to make sure they don't get an unmolested three. No stupid fouls! Remember, we can't call a time-out because we used them all. Whatever happens, don't panic. OK?"

With a combination of nods and grunts, the players conveyed their understanding. They broke the huddle with a rousing, "Go

Spartans!" Jeremy threw the towel he had used to wipe his brow to a student manager. He noticed Maria watching him from the first row of the bleachers, where the cheerleaders had just seated themselves after performing a yell. They exchanged a broad smile, and Jeremy took his place on the floor, locking his mind back on the game.

The Auburn team brought the ball slowly up the court. They had plenty of time to take the lead back. They patiently tried to work the ball into their big man, but the Spartan collapsing zone effectively kept them from getting the ball inside. A pass to the wing on Jeremy's side caused him to move out to prevent an open look at the basket. Another offensive man set a screen, and the man with the ball got around Jeremy, took three steps towards the hoop, and exploded into the air for a jump shot. The ball rolled around the rim twice and dropped through the cords. Jeremy disgustedly grabbed the ball and stepped out of bounds to throw it in to the other guard. Less than a minute and a half remained in his first game since they had let him back on the team in midseason.

Auburn came out in a man-to-man defense. The Spartans wasted several seconds trying to spring someone open for a good shot before Jeremy took advantage of a screen to break into the clear and receive a pass down the lane. Two defenders converged to stop him from scoring. His flying lay-up clanked off the bottom of the rim, but a whistle had blown, stopping play. "Foul on number 43 green," the ref shouted to the scoring table.

Jeremy was awarded two free throws. As he stood waiting for the referee to hand him the ball for the first attempt, Jeremy couldn't help but think of the day less than two weeks ago when he had stood on this same gym floor in his street shoes and testified to the school board on the subject of evolution. He focused on the basket, dribbled a couple of times to get his concentration, and released a soft floater towards the hoop fifteen feet away. Swish. The score was tied. A virtual instant replay of the first shot put the Spartans back in the lead with forty seconds remaining. The noise was deafening.

The visiting team wasn't showing any signs of panic. They worked the ball around and finally, with twelve seconds to go, freed up a man for a short jump shot. When the ball went up, Jeremy sagged back to the basket. The ball hit the rim and bounced in his direction. He was just reaching for the rebound that could help them win the game when an elbow struck the back of his head, diverting his course away from the ball. The boy whose

elbow had contacted Jeremy's head grabbed the loose ball and tossed it to the seven-footer, who knocked the lay-up home, putting his team ahead by one with ten seconds to go. The hometown fans were screaming at the referee for missing the call.

Jeremy's head hurt, but he didn't have time to think about it. He grabbed the inbounds pass from a teammate and flew up the court. He eluded his defender near the circle and went up to take a shot from there. The seven-footer rose up right in his face. Just as Jeremy was going to take the shot, he spotted a wide-open teammate on the other side of the court. Instead of a shot he fired a two handed over-the-head skip pass to his teammate. The tall center from the other team got nothing but air. Jeremy's teammate's shot hit nothing but net just as the buzzer sounded. The Spartans broke out in a celebration at half court, and their fans ran out to join the party.

Now Jeremy had time to notice that he had a bump on his head. He was rubbing it when he heard a voice behind him say, "Nice game, Einstein! You want I should kiss that boo-boo and make it all better?"

Jeremy didn't have to turn around to figure out who had spoken. Only one person called him 'Einstein'. He turned toward the speaker and pulled his hand away from his head. Maria's eyes widened with surprise. "Holy cow, Jeremy, your head is doing a camel imitation."

"What would I do without you here to make sure I don't miss anything in life?"

"Miss about half the things in life, including me."

"You're awfully sure of yourself."

"You created the monster, Einstein. You've told me how wonderful I am so many times, I'm starting to believe it."

A group of exuberant fans interrupted their conversation as they stepped up to congratulate Jeremy. "I'll meet you in the lobby as soon as I can shower!" he yelled through the mini-mob.

"OK. No hurry!" She walked away from the swirling eye of the celebratory hurricane.

It was a good thing she wasn't in a hurry because Jeremy was prevented from exiting to the showers for several minutes. This win was huge, and JD's heroics had saved the day. His teammates and coaches all lavished high fives on him in the locker room. The air was jubilant, but Jeremy longed to be out of this room and back in Maria's presence. He showered as quickly as he could, dressed, combed his hair, and headed out the door. His favorite cheerleader, who was also his favorite fan, was

waiting by the door.

Jeremy drank of her beauty as he approached. She was five-two with chocolate, sparking eyes that graced a face accented by coloring in the cheeks, painted by the exertion of cheering. The perfect figure, topped by long, dark hair, was enough to send a chill down his spine. "I'm in a mood to celebrate tonight," Jeremy said. "Let's go to Mama Stortini's!"

"That's a little expensive, isn't it?"

"Hey, how often do we beat the number one team? Besides, I got a paycheck today, and the money is burning a hole in my wallet."

"OK. If you're sure. Jack in the Box works just fine for me."

"Not tonight. We're celebrating this one in style."

Maria held out her left hand. Jeremy shifted his duffel bag into his left hand and grabbed Maria's hand with his. They walked to Jeremy's Saturn, enjoying every step of the way.

"So, Einstein, are you glad now you went back to the basketball team?"

"That's a no-brainer. Are you glad that you accepted that cheerleader position?"

"I have to say that the highlight is getting to see all of your games."

"I'm going to give you just one month to quit talking like that."

"The season will be over in a month."

"That's why I didn't give you two months."

They reached the blue Saturn that Jeremy called his. There was white color reflecting off of his windshield. He drew closer to examine it and then yelled, "Gross!"

"What's the matter, Jeremy?"

"Looks like we won't have to go a restaurant tonight, if you'll settle for an omelet."

"What?" She examined the slimy surface of the outer glass and shook her head. "I like mine with cheese."

"Maybe there's some of that on the rear windshield." As a joke he went back there to look. He came back with a piece of paper. "No cheese back there, but I found some whine. He read the note to her. 'Next time your windshield will be covered in something harder to get off. PS. It will make great fertilizer.'"

After limping into a gas station and wiping off egg yolk and shells with a squeegee, Jeremy and Maria continued on to the restaurant. There was a big crowd, but tables were available so the hungry teenagers didn't have to play the 'loiter in the lobby' game. They followed the waitress to their table, and Jeremy,



always the gentleman, helped seat Maria.

"This is really a nice place," Maria said. "There are entire towns back in South Dakota that would fit into this building."

"The whole town would fit in here?"

"Well, not the town. Just the people that live in the town."

"Just making sure you're not telling me any of those Midwestern tall tales. So, is this your first time to Mama's?"

"Mom and I came one other time, just to check it out because it was so highly recommended."

"Speaking of your mom, do you have any clue what's going on with her and my dad?"

"All I know for sure is that he's ready for a serious relationship, and she isn't. Your dad has been slightly pushy, and she's drawn back a little bit. He's in the same position with her as he was with your mother. She isn't going to marry someone who doesn't have an equal commitment to the Lord."

Jeremy turned away, wondering if the pain he felt at that remark was communicated by his eyes. With basketball, his job, homework, and some special socializing time, he was finding it hard to pursue his next course of study as he'd promised. He had read almost the entire New Testament, at Maria's suggestion, but had read nothing else. "By the way, Maria, I should finish this weekend."

"Finish what?"

"*Matthew* through *Revelations*."

"Good for you! Are you using up a six pack of highlighters?"

"Actually, my mom already had most of the good stuff highlighted. She basically left me a pink and yellow trail into her mind."

"So, what great nuggets of truth and wisdom have you extracted from that literary gold mine?"

"Tell you what. Why don't we table that discussion until Sunday? I want to avoid all serious discussion tonight and just enjoy your presence."

"You know, Einstein. If you found utopia, you'd be socially irresponsible to live there!"

"I do know that. I'm not suggesting moving into fantasyland. I just thought perhaps we could just step back away from the adult world for a few hours, while we're still eligible to do that without feeling like emotional Houdinis. Do you know what I mean?"

"Exactly, Jeremy. I feel like two years of my childhood got cut out. I don't plan on making up for it in the future, however. We can certainly kick back tonight and enjoy whatever comes our way."

Wanna start a food fight?"

"I'm sorry, but this is a swanky restaurant. They don't serve Spam here. You ever try flinging pasta? It's just like a throwing a wet football on a windy night. Not much chance of it going where you want it to."

"You sound like you have some experience trying."

"There are some advantages to not having a mother."

"I suggest you stop revealing your secrets before you pop my bubble about Mr. Perfect."

"Maybe I *should* pop that bubble. You gotta love the real me, not what you think I am."

"I know, Jeremy. None of us are perfect, but some are closer than others. I think the key is that we need to move in that direction. Jesus said, 'I wish that all of you could be perfect as my Father in Heaven is perfect.'"

"I picked up on that. He also said, 'Why do you call me good?' I found it interesting that the person all the Christians are supposed to emulate says he isn't good – yet the story goes he had to be perfect in order to be the sacrifice that would free everybody from their imperfections. I want to talk about that aspect on Sunday, but let's find something lighthearted to talk about. OK?"

"I'm trying, Jeremy."

"Try not. Do or do not. There is no try."

"Arggggh! Einstein quotes Yoda. What'll be next?"

"Stephen Jay Gould quotes Scooby Doo. 'Ro Ro! Found another skeleton in the closet. Must be the missing link.'"

"Would I be out of line to suggest your humor needs to *evolve*?"

"Would I get my face slapped for suggesting your humor did evolve...from Mr. Bogue's?"

"Yeah, probably."

"OK. I won't suggest that then. Speaking of Mr. Bogue, I wonder who did the drive-by egging on my car. Do you suppose Mr. Bogue had something to do with it?"

"I find it hard to believe that a nearly senior citizen teacher would resort to slinging eggs at student's cars to get revenge, especially leaving a note allowing even more opportunity for someone to see him do it. However, it would be ironic that the guy who always gets unequally yolked would resort to payment in kind."

"I get it. Maria told a Biblical pun."

"Good for you! I see you're getting something out of your

reading."

The waitress arrived with their food, and Jeremy's thoughts migrated from eggs to pasta. They finished a delightful meal and strolled back to the parking lot, which wasn't lit very well. JD didn't see anything suspicious, but upon putting his hand on Maria's door handle he uttered another exclamation and pulled his hand away.

"What's wrong, Jeremy?"

"I've been slimed again."

"Is it what I think it is?" asked Maria.

"If you think it's doo-doo, no. It's just eggs, again. If I hadn't been such a gallant gentlemen, the goo would be dripping off your hand now instead of mine. No good deed goes unpunished."

"In other words, Einstein, you think I owe you a debt of gratitude?"

"Already on your tab. Lowest interest rates in town. Now what am I gonna do?"

"Let's apply logic here. Your hand is already slimed, right?"

"Big time."

"So it can't get worse by opening the door, right?"

"Not much, anyway."

"So open my door and then go around to your door, and I'll open it from the inside for you – which I'll put on your tab. I'll hand you some Kleenexes I have in my purse, and you can wipe your hands off. And you shouldn't have to touch egg again. Hose it down when you get home. By the way, Kleenexes cost extra. Luckily my interest rates are the same as yours."

"Brilliant plan. Why didn't I think of that?"

"Maybe because you were too preoccupied with the goo on you. Men are such babies."

"Excuse me! Have you ever gotten eggs on your delicate skin?"

"Jeremy, I cook, you know. When you break eggs, the goo sometimes doesn't all go into the bowl or pan. I've had to wipe that junk off lots of times. It didn't hurt, poison, or gross me out."

*Whatever!* Jeremy grabbed the door handle and pulled the door open. *Baby am I?* He kept his fingers on the handle until Maria was safely inside and then almost slammed the door. *This is the first time I have ever been upset with Maria.* He marched over to his side of the car determined that he would open his own door just to prove he was no baby, but Maria had carried out her plan before he got there. He took the tissues from her, not because he needed relief from the junk, but because he didn't

want to get the interior of his car messed up. Luckily, he had a garbage sack in his car, so he wasn't forced to be a litterbug.

"Jeremy, are you upset with me?" He didn't answer. "Hello, Earth to JD. You can't be doing this."

"Doing what?"

"Getting mad and then using the silent treatment on me. If you get upset with me, tell me about it. One of my favorite poems by William Blake goes, 'I was angry with a friend. I told my wrath; my wrath did end. I was angry with my foe. I told him not; my wrath did grow.' I'm sorry if you didn't like being called a baby. I guess I was just used to my mom saying it to my dad back in the days when he was sick with a cold or something."

"I've heard it used before. It's not very flattering."

"No, I guess it isn't. We can't always speak flattering things to each other. Sometimes we need to be blunt and honest about things, but in a loving manner."

"Did you call me 'baby' in a loving manner?"

"I...I guess not. I was belittling you, wasn't I?"

"Bingo."

"I'm so sorry, Jeremy. Please forgive me."

JD looked over at her. *How can I stay upset after seeing that angelic look?* "Forget about it."

"Nope, we can't forget, Jeremy, until we forgive. Otherwise it's just dirt shoved under the carpet, which will resurface later to slip us up. Will you forgive me?"

"OK, I forgive you. Please forgive me for being such a baby about being called a baby."

"You're forgiven too. See how easy that was, and now the slate is clean. Whenever conflicts come up in life, we can deal with them like this and make them go away, or let them grow into something that can bring destruction. Do you follow me?"

"Yes, ma'am. So, let's change the subject now that we've wiped the board clean, along with my hands. Who do you suppose is out to get me? How in the world did they find my car in that dark parking lot off the main road?"

"Good question. They must have followed us."

"I think you're right. Dang! Why wasn't I paying attention when we drove over here?"

"Stop beating yourself up. You had no reason to be paranoid, watching your rear-view mirror like some goon in a spy thriller."

"But now I do, and I'm going to keep my eyes open like a hawk. I wonder if the police can trace eggs the same way guns are tracked – you know, with DNA or something," Jeremy said.

"Einstein, this was a prank, not a murder. Even if the police had the technology to track down where the eggs were purchased and by whom, they wouldn't do that just to find some egg slingers."

"So I have to decide whether tis nobler to bear the slings and arrows of outrageous chickens or to take up arms against a sea of unknown pranksters?"

"If that one doesn't cause Shakespeare to roll over in his grave, nothing will."

"Glad you liked it."

"OK, Sherlock Holmes, quickly leaving the scene of the chicken crime, I'm moving the subject matter up the rung of the priority ladder. What are you going to read when you finish the New Testament?"

"I'm not sure. Why don't you give me a list of books and prioritize them for me? Remember, you're in this with me, so don't just pick books you've already read."

"Putting the pressure on, are you, Shakespeare? OK. I'll do a little research on the Internet tomorrow and find out what books I haven't read that should be included in your study. Of course, I'll be looking for books that present an argument for Christianity. You're going to have to be the devil's advocate, as the expression goes, and find the books that make sport of the sacred cows."

"It's a deal. Sunday afternoon, we'll exchange lists and try to figure out what we can borrow and what we need to buy when we get sufficient funds. I know you used up your dad's research funds on the evolution study. Maybe I can sweet-talk my dad into financing our religion study. He might even be willing to join us. Now that he's off the 'God doesn't exist' bandwagon, he's in the same position I am, as far as seeking the truth. And it will be great for re-bonding with him."

"I can spend some of my baby-sitting money, perhaps, to get some books."

"Hold on. You spent Masterson money on the last gig. I'm bringing home about \$50 a week from my job, so between my dad and me, the Dillons will take care of this expense."

"All right. I never argue with a man once he's made up his mind – and he's right."

"Did I ever tell you that you're beau—"

Maria threw her hands up in front of her face. "Jeremy, look out!"

Maria's scream caused JD to return his eyes to the road and swerve just in time to prevent hitting an animal.

"Nice reflexes, Einstein. I really like you looking at me and suggesting that I'm attractive, but, dude, I'd rather have you do it when you're not driving."

"Oh, come on. That was just a possum. If you weren't here, I'd have been *trying* to hit him."

"Thanks for sharing that with me. What if it was a person instead of a possum?"

"Well, it wasn't. So why did the chicken cross the road?"

"Oh, no. More egg jokes? I don't know. Pray tell, oh ye court jester."

"To show the possum that it really can be done."

"I don't get it."

"Didn't you have possums back in South Dakota?"

"I never saw any."

"Well, you'll see lots of them around here. Most of them on the menu for the Road Kill Café. They seem to be seriously traffic challenged. A little pavement possum and eggs off the windshield, and you'd have a wonderful omelet."

"If you're trying to gross me out, you're succeeding."

"Oops, I'm sorry. Yeah, those things are pretty gross. If I find out who's tattooing my auto with eggs, I might have to tie a dead possum by the tail to his door handle."

"Jeremy!"

"OK, subject has officially been killed. Now, as I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted, have I ever told you that you're beautiful?"

"Only every time you've been with me since our first date. You sound like a broken record."

"You don't like it?"

"It just gets a little old. It's cool to say nice things to people, but don't go overboard. Too much of anything takes away the special status. Shakespeare said something like if every day were sport, there would be no holidays."

"OK. You asked for it. And here we are at your house, so I won't have to worry about letting it slip out again tonight."

Jeremy let Maria open her door from the inside tonight. He'd return to being a gentleman when the door handle wasn't growing stuff on it. The two strolled to the house. The porch light was on, allowing them to see each other very clearly. Jeremy fidgeted. *Is tonight the right time for our first kiss? Probably not after I killed any romantic mood we might have had with road kill jokes.*

Maria studied Jeremy closely. "That lump on your head looks horrible."

"Wow, thanks. Now it feels all better after that soothing compliment."

"Maybe you really want me to kiss it and make it all better?"

As a joke, Jeremy bowed his head toward Maria. To his amazement he felt her hands grip his head and then her lips brush up against the protruding bump. *What a romantic moment! We'll be telling our grandkids about this one. NOT!*

*Come to think about it, I didn't tell Maria that I've never kissed a girl. She might be waiting for me to make the first move, and I'm waiting for her to take the initiative. What a bizarre catch-22 situation.*

While Jeremy was entertaining all of these thoughts, Maria kissed his head again, but not on the knob. Then another butterfly kiss descended a bit lower. A couple of more delicate kisses brought her to his cheek. He was frozen like a statue but enjoying every stroke of the oral paintbrush. His eyes were closed as he did an imitation of a sponge, soaking up everything. The magic lips continued their journey down along his cheek and toward his nose. Breathing seemed to be a good thing to do, but JD didn't want to interrupt anything, so he sipped in air without moving a muscle.

Much to his surprise, the wandering lips touched down on his nose and left a tickling sensation when they departed. His eyes opened up. Maria's eyes were boring right into his. Those eyes were awesome from a distance, but now he was close enough to detect little gold specks swimming in the brown pools. Their eyes never wandered away from each other, but somehow their lips managed to find one another's without visual cues. During the whole episode up till now, Jeremy had been a bystander. Now he felt like he needed to be a participant. *But how? Am I supposed to suck like a vacuum cleaner or stick my tongue out or what?*

Before he could do anything, Maria drew her head back away from his and looked him in the eyes again. Jeremy's whole body was going crazy. The phrase 'I sing the body electric' went through his head. Maria seemed to be doing the singing here, but his body was tingling from seemingly every nerve ending.

"Well, Einstein. Does it feel better now?"

"Does what feel better now?"

"Your lump."

"What lump?"

"I guess it worked."

"You know, Maria, someone once said that laughter is the best medicine, but obviously they never kissed you, or they'd

know laughter was only second best."

She laughed. "I don't need medicine, but a little preventive care is in order, so thanks for the laughter."

"And thank you for the ecstasy. Now I know what the agony will be."

"What's that?"

"Saying good night to you."

She threw her arms around his waist and nestled up against him until her head lay against his shoulder. Her height was perfect, and she fit into his arms as if she'd been molded for him. "You know, Preppie. This causes a little dilemma."

"Preppie? You haven't called me that for a while. And what dilemma are you referring to?"

"I miss the old days when I had to keep your heart at bay. Now the dilemma has become that I'll have to keep your body at bay instead."

"Oh – that dilemma."

"My dad had lots of talks with me on the subject of sex. One of the key points he made was: don't ever let a boy get his engine revved up because once he does, it's hard to stop him. He said the girl has better control of herself because her motor takes a while to warm up. So, I'm afraid I have to set some boundaries now that we've crossed the sexual Rubicon. I want my wedding night to be very special, so I'm not taking any chances. Are you following me here, Einstein?"

"Maria, I have to tell you I don't know much about this sex stuff. To tell you the truth, this was my first kiss. If I feel like this after one little kiss, I can only imagine what would be happening if this feeling was intensified in any way. I'm afraid I'd be almost powerless to stop."

"Exactly. Even the best intentions go by the wayside if the boundaries get crossed because human sexuality is one of the most powerful forces on our planet. Lots of kids break their chastity vows when they let things get out of hand, thinking they can stop at any time. They can't, so you need to live with the fact that we won't be walking close to the edge of this figurative cliff. So if you can't live with that, you'll need to find a new girl."

"Maria, I don't want another girl. You set whatever boundaries you want. I don't want to bring you pain or shame or anything bad in any way. I certainly don't want to ruin your wedding night. In fact, I was hoping, perhaps, I'd even be around to enjoy it myself."

Maria pulled away from him and eyeballed him again. "Why, Mr. Dillon! That almost sounds like a pre-proposal. It sounds



romantic and thrilling and every other glorious word I can think up – but we have to remember that we have a lot of growing up to do yet. There's a lot of life to go through before I'm ready for marriage. I realize that if I get married before I graduate from college, my chance of ever getting my degree will be slim. So my marriage dreams lie beyond that. Are you willing to wait that long?"

"For you, I'd wait until the end of the Earth."

"OK. This is getting a little intoxicating. We better quit now because you have to drive home. Jeremy, thank you so much for a wonderful evening and for being such a gallant gentleman. Good night."

"Sweet dreams, Princess."

Without lingering to the point of wallowing in the sweet sorrow of parting, Maria opened the door and disappeared inside.

Jeremy whistled and skipped back to his car. He saw the egg on the side and then remembered that the whole evening hadn't been as pleasurable as the last fifteen minutes. *Big deal!* He let his memory do several instant replays of 'The Kiss' as he drove home. *Now I have a story worthy of sharing with the grandkids.*

## Chapter 2

### Back on the Research Trail

Jeremy reported to work at eight a.m. on Saturday. A flood of attaboys from fans who had seen the basketball game the night before threatened to distract him, but he stuck to his duties as well as possible. When his lunch break came, he took advantage of the pay phone and dialed Maria's number.

"Masterson residence. Maria speaking."

"Hello, Princess."

"What's up, Einstein?"

"Break time at Jack in the Box. I miss you."

"I miss you too, JD."

"Can we do something together tonight?"

"Sorry, Preppie, I have a babysitting job this evening."

"Likely story. You're probably just making an excuse. No doubt you have something more interesting to do, like playing solitaire."

"Is that a 'woe is me' attitude coming from you, Jeremy? Shall I get out my violin and play a sad song?"

"OK. Just forget it. I'll just have to wait until tomorrow. So, we meet at church and then go to your house, right?"

"That's the plan, Stan."

"Do you realize you've called me five different names in this short conversation?"

"We better hang up then before I call you something you don't like."

"You wouldn't dare. No, I take that back; you would. I better go eat my lunch while I still have time. Enjoy babysitting and don't forget to compile my list of books!"

"Sir, yes, sir! And good night, Sergeant Carter!" She hung up before he could comment on the sixth name.

\* \* \*

Jeremy's dad was working in the kitchen when the tired teen arrived home from work. "Hey, great game last night, son. Where in the world did you learn to do that shot from the navel? It was like the ball came out of your pocket. That big dude never knew

what happened."

"Just a little something I developed shooting around in the driveway. I figured it might come in handy someday."

"You had that right. Couldn't have chosen a better situation."

"Dad, I wanted to talk to you about something more important than basketball. Got a minute?"

"Sure. What's up?"

"Maria and I are going to undertake a study of religion, much like we researched evolution. I was thinking, maybe, you'd like to participate. And, perhaps, you can buy us some books to do the research?" He gave his father a canary-eating feline grin.

"Ah. So this is going to cost me something, huh?"

"Only if you're willing to shell out the bucks. I was just thinking that you might want to go on the same spiritual search yourself. It would be fun to do it together this time and have some good discussions."

"Sounds like fun. How much money are you talking?"

"Probably a couple hundred. It would be more, but I'll be buying used books whenever possible."

Mr. Dillon whistled. "This better be fun. I might have to refinance the house to buy all those books."

"Maybe Maria will let me borrow her violin."

"What?"

"Nothing. One thing you have to look at, Dad, is that this is an investment in your spiritual future. Finding a faith that you can claim is referred to in the Bible as a pearl of great price."

"If I'm going to search for truth, I'm going to be asking lots of probing questions."

"Join the club. That's exactly what I have on my agenda."

When he finished eating dinner, Jeremy retired to his bedroom and browsed to Google on his computer. After typing in some search criteria and clicking the 'Search' button, he surveyed the list of matches displayed on his screen. In a notebook by his side, he periodically jotted some notes, usually the title of a book and the author. After a couple of hours, he got up from his chair and went back downstairs. *I thought there was a lot of material about evolution. There's enough on religion to keep me busy for a lifetime.*

His dad was having a late snack. Jeremy wasn't averse to partaking of a wedge of cake and some milk. This little impromptu get-together in the kitchen gave him a chance to start the discussion with his dad concerning the thoughts rolling around in his head. "Dad, can you tell me why there are so many different

Christian churches? There seem to be hundreds of different flavors of Christianity."

"Excellent question."

"Which usually means you don't know the answer."

"Usually, but in this case, I have some clues. I haven't done extensive research into the different denominations. On top of that we have non-denominational churches which are too numerous to count. You're right. Christianity makes Baskin and Robbins look like a single dimensional street vendor when it comes to variety."

"And the clues are?"

"Hold on to your britches, son. I'm getting there. First of all, let's consider human nature. We have a tendency as humans to divide ourselves into categories whenever there's any type of disagreement. Look at the Bible and how much material there is in that thick book of books. A large percentage of words and passages in the writing could cause people to disagree on the meaning, thus opening up the opportunity for division. Are you with me?"

"Yeah. I see that aspect, but what I read in the Bible calls for unity in lots of places. For example, one place mentioned 'one Lord, one faith, one baptism' and in another place Jesus said, 'I wish you would be one as my Father and I are one.'"

"I know, Jeremy. Unity is a desirable quality, but it's very elusive with human beings. We struggle to maintain unity even in a close family. I don't have to remind you about the division between you and me a short while ago."

"No, it's way too fresh still."

"So let's take one denomination that I do know something about, the Baptists. Their main point of contention is that everyone needs to be baptized by immersion."

"By what?"

"Immersion. It means to be totally under water. Some churches sprinkle or pour to baptize, and some dunk converts, just like Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist."

"Ah. So Baptists don't like the sprinklers?"

"Well, they don't like the doctrine of the sprinklers. In theory, they don't dislike people just because they don't hold the same ideas."

"Gotcha. What's your opinion in this matter?"

"Personally I have no idea where the sprinklers got the idea that their baptism methods were valid. All of the baptisms in the Bible, including Jesus, were done in a body of water such as the River Jordan. The baptism was supposed to signify a death to an

old life and rising up in a new life. So baptism signified a burial and then a resurrection of sorts."

"So I assume you got dunked."

Mr. Dillon coughed and looked away. "I got dunked lots of times when I was a kid but...."

"What? Are you saying you were never baptized?"

"I was trying not to say it and let genius boy figure it out, which you just did."

Jeremy ran his hand through his hair. "I'm trying to put this picture together. So you became a Christian, but you didn't accept the ceremonial death of yourself, so you could be a new man?"

"Don't look at me like that! I haven't seen you rising out of the baptismal font lately!"

"And you won't either – until I figure out that I want to be a Christ follower. Seems to make sense to do what Jesus did in that case. I keep hearing this 'born again' phrase, but I don't see how you can be born again unless you die. That is a real commitment."

"You're right. And that was why I never did it. I wasn't willing to commit everything. I once ran across a little story that described me perfectly. I don't remember the exact words, but it went something like, 'I want three dollars worth of God. Not enough to explode my soul or disturb my sleep, just enough to equal a warm cup of milk or a snooze in the sunshine.' There was more but I don't remember it."

"Are you bragging or complaining?"

"I'm afraid I'm 'ashaming', if I can make up my own word. Jeremy, I taught you that when you put your hand to something, you should throw yourself into it with vigor. Well, I didn't take my own advice when it came to Christianity."

"I can understand, Dad. It doesn't look like an easy road to walk. The good news is that as long as you've still got a pulse, it's not too late to start."

"The old 'better late than never' scenario, huh?"

"Exactly. You know how Jesus talked in parables?"

"Yeah, I always found that interesting. He usually never taught by just saying something straight out. His usual method was to spin a story around his point to give it extra relevance and at the same time allow his listeners to discover the moral of the story themselves," Paul said.

"There's one story about laborers in a vineyard or something. Some people came to work early in the morning and worked all day. Others came shortly before the end of the day. All got paid the same amount, that which was promised, no matter how much

each worked."

"I remember that one. The early birds complained because the late arrivals got the same reward."

"Exactly. Anyway, my point is that you will get the same reward if you start later as opposed to sooner. So don't worry about past mistakes. Just be concerned with the future. Kind of like what coach tells us when we mess up on the football field and get behind. We don't catch up by crying about our screw-ups or even thinking about them."

"You sound like the father again. Are you trying to eliminate my job?"

"Not even close, Dad. You need to accept truth wherever it comes from, not just from the lips of an 'authority' figure."

"More wisdom flows from the lips of my kid. I always thought that Mother Teresa spoke much more eloquently than television preachers on the subject of Christianity. And she rarely opened her mouth."

"Speaking of television preachers, I guess I never even thought about using TV to do research. Do they have regularly scheduled shows about religion on the tube?" Mr. Dillon laughed. "What's so funny, Dad?"

"You really are ignorant about this topic, aren't you? They have entire networks that show nothing but Christian programming."

"Oh. I was ignorant of everything, but now, I'm only ignorant of most things."

"I'll take the blame for that, son. I filtered out all positive information about churches and God in my attempt to keep you from going down that road. Ironically, here we both are, thinking about going down that path."

"Maria keeps saying God works in mysterious ways."

"I have to ask you, Jeremy, what happens if we do this research together, and one of us decides to convert, and the other decides not to?"

"That's a tough question, or maybe I should say that's a hard answer. I can't choose what you choose just because you're making that decision. The same is true for you. Each of us has our own life, our own mind, and our own conscience. I've already shown you once that I wasn't afraid to follow where the truth led, even if you were against it. That hasn't changed."

"Understood. I realize that we have the potential for a very joyful situation, and also the possibility of heartbreak. No matter how it turns out, I'll respect you for making the effort to understand

what you believe or don't believe, letting the chips fall where they might. I'll know it's not a decision you took lightly or made in a moment of emotional vulnerability."

"Thanks, Dad. I can't ask for any more than that. Hey, why don't we have another piece of cake and check out the boob tube to see what's on the Christian networks you were talking about?"

"Sure. I'll have to do some extra exercise tomorrow to burn up the surplus calories, but what the heck?"

Father and son sat on the couch and enjoyed their cake while watching a distinguished-looking man in a white suit. A woman came up on the stage and said she had been totally deaf in one ear and almost deaf in the other before the service began. She claimed her hearing was restored. Mr. White Suit stood behind her and spoke, "Can you hear me now?" He moved into other positions and repeated his question.

Jeremy and his dad broke into laughter. It was like the telephone commercial. After a while of listening to the woman talk about the recovery of her hearing, the man waved his arm over her head, and she fell down. She got quickly up off the floor, and he repeated the action. Jeremy glanced over at his dad. Both simultaneously shrugged their shoulders. The second time the woman got up she was helped off the stage by a man in a dark suit.

"What's going on here, Dad?"

"You're asking me? It's been eighteen years since I went to church. I never saw anything like this."

Jeremy kept watching to get a name for this mysterious man in the white suit. "I'm definitely going to check this out," said Jeremy. "This seems...."

"Bogus?"

"Perfect word, Dad. That's how it looks, but we're in the mode of searching for truth, so let's not judge without more evidence. My reaction reminds me of that football movie *Remember the Titans* when the team did the crazy dance on the way out to the field. At first, I thought the dance was ludicrous, but it grew on me to the point I thought it was cool. Maybe this will be the same way."

"Maybe. I have to wonder about the theatrics of the whole operation. Seems incompatible with the Christianity your mother practiced, but like you said, we need to dig below the first impressions."

\* \* \*

The next morning Jeremy woke up early and opened his mother's Bible. He turned to the place in *Revelations* where he left off and began reading aloud. He discovered this helped his concentration. This book was much different than the other books in the New Testament. In some places he was barely treading water due to the complexity and the unfamiliar language. It reminded him of a fantasy book with the talk of dragons, serpents, and plagues. Supposedly, it was a revealing of the future. That fact made it interesting, but the language made it seem impossible to really nail down what that future was. *This isn't something I'm going to understand all by myself and with only one reading. I'll just get to the end and then look for answers from other people. At least I can say I finished the New Testament.*

His eyes had just scanned the last sentence when his dad called up the stairs to him. "Hey, Jeremy, you want some eggs?"

*Eggs. I forgot all about the mystery slimer.* Jeremy walked to the top of the staircase so he could see his father. "I've kinda lost my appetite for eggs right now. I'll just have some toast and cereal."

"OK. You're on your own then."

"Do you want to come to church with me today?"

"I've kind of lost my appetite to see Lisa Masterson right now, so you'll have to forgive me for not going. Maybe another time."

"OK. Remember, research will be more than just reading books. You're going to have to leave your comfort zone a little bit if you want to find truth."

"Yeah, I realize that, Jeremy, but I'm not quite ready yet."

After eating and getting ready for church, Jeremy determined there was time for some more computer research before he had to leave. Within a couple of minutes of starting his search, he encountered a book entitled *Why I Rejected Christianity*. That sounded like the type of book he was looking for. In reading a little bit about it, he discovered the author was a former pastor. A link on that page led him to a blog that was created by the author of the book. The whole blog was dedicated to debunking Christianity. *I gotta read this and see what turns a pastor into a debunker.* Shortly into the history on the author, Jeremy started to chuckle. The site's banner described it as a blog run by freethinkers, skeptics, agnostics and atheists. *Now I see that one major cause for his deconversion involved evolution. This guy is a self-proclaimed intellectual freethinker who jumped the pastoral ship to a leaky lifeboat named The Charles Darwin.*

*I shouldn't be laughing at this. Maria would be torqued at me.*



*She'd be down on her knees praying for this guy, immediately. Actually, this is pretty sad, and it's a very interesting situation. If there is no God, who cares if a pastor converts a lot of people since they had nothing to gain or lose. But a person who actively seeks to persuade people that there is no God places the people who listen to him in jeopardy of losing their eternal life. What kind of man spends half his life trying to win people to God, and then the rest of his life trying to make them believe there's no God? Ironically, the guy says if he still believed in Satan, he would have said the events in his life were orchestrated by the legions of Hell. What if they were? Another kill for the evil one. I think in researching Christianity I'm also going to have to research Satan. It doesn't appear the two can be separated.*

Jeremy checked his watch. *Not much time left now.* He bookmarked the page in his favorites list so he could come back later. *This looks intriguing. The fact this guy swallowed the evolution story doesn't instill in me any confidence that his other arguments are going to be valid, but I want to see what they are. No stone unturned is my mantra, so I'm going to turn over this stone even if it looks flaky.*

When Jeremy went out and unlocked his car door, he noticed some white color behind his vehicle. Curious to figure out what it was, he walked back and discovered that the mad egg slinger must have been at work again but came up a little short this time. It appeared that two eggs had been flung during the night. *They were probably in a big hurry to get out of here and just chucked them from their car. I'd better talk to Dad about this when I get home tonight. Fortunately, I don't have to clean off my car again.*

There was a parking spot on the street just past the church. Jeremy maneuvered his Saturn into the open spot and walked up to the church. Maria was standing in the lobby with her back to him when he came in. He snuck up behind her, tapped her on the left shoulder and then ducked to her right. She turned and looked over her right shoulder instead. "Nice try, Einstein. I might have been born at night, but it wasn't last night."

"Speaking of night, somebody hurled some more eggs at my car last night. Missed this time though, thank goodness."

"That could get old in a hurry."

"Duh! It's already too old for me. Let's go sit down." The couple threaded their way through the crowded lobby and joined Maria's mother in the chapel. "So how did your babysitting go last night? By the way, you don't really sit on the babies, do you?"

"Which question do I answer first? Actually, I'm not even going

to answer the second one. You're just being a smart aleck. Babysitting went fine. Perfect little angels, after I got them to sleep."

"So then, I suppose you got paid for reading a book or watching TV?"

"It's a tough job, but somebody's got to do it. Actually, I surfed the net and compiled a list of books for our research."

"Cool! I got a list too."

"So is that how you spent your night?"

"Some of it. The rest of it I spent with Dad. We had a great discussion, and then we watched some Christian TV."

"Really? I—"

Maria was interrupted by a voice over the loudspeaker asking them all to stand up and join in worship. After all of the opening rituals, the pastor came out to deliver his sermon of the week. *Is every service almost exactly the same? It seems like they do the same thing every week.* Jeremy grabbed his notebook and pen and prepared to write fast.

"A month from now we're going to do something very different. Don't come to church that weekend because church will be leaving the building. We will be going out into the community and serving others. Our theme here is love God and love others. We're going to kill two birds with one stone that weekend by doing both at the same time. We'll have sign-up sheets available next weekend. You can volunteer for tasks such as doing yard work, cleaning gutters, painting, visiting retirement homes, making cookies, and lots of other things. So discuss it with your family members because this is for kids as well. If you want a scriptural reference for what we're going to do, here it is:

"*Matthew 25:31-46*: 'When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory:

'''And before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats:

'''And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left.

'''Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world:

'''For I was hungry, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in:

'''Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I

was in prison, and ye came unto me.

"Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee and hungered, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink?

"When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee?

"Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee?

"And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.

"Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels:

"For I was hungry, and ye gave me no meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink:

"Then shall he answer them, saying, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me.

"And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal."

After the pastor finished this passage, Jeremy began frantically jotting down thoughts into his notebook.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Truth is More Than Skin Deep**

Later, at Maria's house, the trio enjoyed a nice lunch together. After doing justice to the sumptuous meal, Jeremy planted his stuffed body on the couch in preparation for what he anticipated to be a lively question-and-answer session. He had lots of questions that needed answers.

"OK, Jeremy, where do we start?"

"I'm not sure. There are so many questions in my head that my brain is on overload. I must warn you that I've been storing up a lot of thoughts about what I've read in the Bible and observed in life. Maybe the best thing to do is get the heaviest issues out the way first, and then the little things can be cleaned up later."

"Works for me. Fire away with your heavy artillery."

"FYI. I'm a big fan of humor, but I thought I better warn you that this discussion today will not be very funny. There are some serious questions on my list here, and they might not set very well with you. When I'm finished, you might think I brought out the real artillery. I don't want to upset you, but I have to get to the bottom of this matter. Maybe I should save my questions for someone else, so I don't cause any friction between us?"

Maria frowned. "You're scaring me a little bit, Jeremy. I don't want anything coming between us either, but in order to make our relationship strong, we need to be genuine people and deal with reality, whatever it might be or how we might perceive it. What's our goal here?"

"My goal is to find truth. I don't want to have to decide between having truth and having you. How cruel would fate be to pull the carpet out from under us now? Can I not have you and truth?"

"I hope so. In fact, I know so, if what you find is really truth and not a false illusion of it."

"Do you think you've found and know total truth?"

"No, of course not!"

"That leaves two possibilities here. Either there is truth that you haven't yet uncovered, which is totally new truth to *you*, or some of the truth you now possess isn't true at all."

Maria thought about that statement for a second. "Logically

speaking, I think you're correct."

"What worries me is that I'll discover something that I believe to be true which is diametrically opposed to what you find to be true. Can we live with that? Would one of us change our minds to match the other person? Can we just agree to disagree?"

"I like the last solution, but I understand where you're coming from. Sometimes we can't compromise our principles even to save a relationship. Another thing I want to mention: the Bible says there's a way that seems right to a man, but it leads to destruction."

Jeremy got up from the couch and paced around the room. "The thing that drives me crazy is everything seems so important, but how do we know exactly what's true? How can we be sure we're on the path that leads to life and not destruction?"

"For me personally, God puts a peace in my heart called the peace that passes all understanding."

"Do atheists think they have that peace in their heart? How about Buddhists or Moslems?"

"I can't answer that question, Jeremy. I've never been one of those or communicated extensively with one to get into their heads. I have no clue what they feel or think."

"What if they claim to have that same peace? Does that mean either they or you are deluded?"

"It could. Hopefully them."

"And while I'm on the subject, what about other people who worship Jesus, but who don't believe the same things you do?"

"The message I hear preached all the time and that I embrace is that we need a relationship with Jesus and not religion."

"I'm not sure what that means. What's the difference?"

"Religion involves a lot of rules and behaviors, and a relationship deals with love and trust."

"What kind of rules?"

"Stuff like the commandments, personal purity such as not swearing and sexual abstinence outside of marriage. For some people, not smoking or drinking. Going to church and reading the Bible and praying. There are lots of things people do to try to be holy. Evangelical Christianity teaches that those things don't impress God, and they're like filthy rags, according to Isaiah in the Old Testament."

"So, this little prayer the pastor recites at the end of church where everyone closes their eyes and someone raises their hand is what allows people go to Heaven. By anonymously raising their hand, they buy their ticket?"

"That's the way they have chosen to do it at Calvary."

Jeremy paced the room some more. He stopped in the middle of a step and turned toward Maria. "Believe me, I don't like putting you on the spot like this, but I'm just not buying it."

"What part?"

"Call me crazy, but what kind of surrender to God is done in secrecy? Why do people have to shut their eyes? So people who don't have the guts to stand up and say 'I'm on God's side' can punch their ticket without anybody knowing. If they're afraid to make that commitment openly, what are their chances of keeping that promise?"

"I don't know. That sounds like a valid point, Jeremy. Not everyone does it the same way. Other churches I attended have the people recite the prayer by repeating after the pastor. At crusades, like Billy Graham's, people usually come down to the stage. Whatever form it takes, it's called giving your heart to Jesus, being saved, or being born again. It doesn't have to happen in church, and it doesn't require other people around or a specific prayer. Some people do it while driving down the highway, and some when they're perched on a bridge ready to jump off. The place doesn't matter. What's important is that you surrender your life to God."

"That makes me feel a little better. Having to go down right in front of people requires some commitment. Salvation seems to be the key word in this world of religion. It's like a 'get out of jail free' card in Monopoly. Is that a fair analogy?"

"Close enough for starters."

Jeremy grabbed his notebook and read through his written thoughts. "How do you explain what the pastor quoted this morning from *Matthew* about feeding the hungry? Did Jesus say those who raised their hands at some point in their life go to my right and you goats who never raised your hands, go to my left and unto eternal punishment?"

Maria wiped her brow. "No."

"Somebody at church was saying that there's nothing I can do to earn salvation because it's a free gift. Do you agree with that?"

"I agree that's what's preached at the churches I've attended."

"Then how do you explain what Jesus said? According to him if you don't feed or give water to the least of those on Earth, then you can't get into Heaven? Is that not doing something? In fact, isn't raising your hand and surrendering, doing something? If salvation was a free gift that can only be earned by doing nothing, then didn't Jesus save everyone on Earth when he died?"

"Obviously he didn't, or he wouldn't have mentioned the goats going off to eternal damnation."

Jeremy raised his hands in the air giving the touchdown signal. "Bingo! So, we have established that not everybody gets to go to Heaven. One cornerstone is laid in our foundation of truth if Jesus is the Son of God. For now, we will assume that fact, so we now know that there's a Heaven and a Hell, and Jesus said those who love and help others would go to Heaven."

"In this particular passage, anyway. You have to be careful when you read the Bible, Jeremy. If you take things out of context, the meaning can get distorted."

"Yes. In that one passage. So, we need to search for more passages where Jesus mentions Heaven and Hell for more evidence. In the meantime, let's revisit salvation. Is David going to Heaven?"

"Of course."

"And Noah and Abraham and Adam?"

"Ditto."

"But they couldn't have surrendered their hearts and lives to Jesus Christ because he was born after they died. They never even heard of the name 'Jesus' I don't think. That word isn't even found in the Old Testament."

"Did you read the whole thing?"

"Nope. I picked up some Bible study software that lets you do word searches. The name Jesus doesn't even show up one time. None of the prophets and holy people could have asked Jesus into their hearts."

"That's true. They were under a different system then. The people lived under the law, but Jesus brought a new covenant."

"One that would cause a Jewish believer who in the past would have been saved by the law, to be denied eternal life because he was born after Jesus, even though he had never even heard of Jesus?"

"I see your point. That's a tough question. Jesus did say he came to save the world, not condemn it."

Jeremy sat back down on the couch. "And then there are all those other billions of people that have lived all over the Earth and never heard the name of Jesus. Would a fair, loving God condemn them to an eternal life of suffering because of where they were born? What about the Native Americans? They were here for hundreds of years without knowledge of Jesus. Will they be condemned to a hell they never even heard of?"

"I try not to think of that. But I have. I don't have an answer for

you. It doesn't seem fair, but who am I to tell God what's fair?"

"Let's go back to this religion versus relationship thing. Do we find this reference in the Bible?"

"I doubt it. I think it's a modern way of explaining the situation."

"I have some initial thoughts on this statement. For example, say you and I were married. We would have a relationship, right?"

"Of course."

"What makes up a relationship? For example, what if on your birthday, I fail to give you something or even say 'Happy Birthday' to you? I broke the rules of a good relationship. Would it matter?"

"Are you trying to say that relationships have built-in rules?"

"Yeah. Things like showing respect and showing affection. In other words, if I said, 'Maria and I have a great relationship. I never listen to her, and she obeys me like a puppy, yada yada.' Seems to me if someone asked your opinion of that relationship, you wouldn't say it was a great one."

"I concede that you have a point. Relationships can't be totally divorced from rules, but they go beyond rules."

"Fine. I'll concede that point, and we agree on that subject. Now let's go back where I think we disagree. I hate to say this, but where in the Bible do you find the sinner's prayer and the raising of the hand? I read the whole New Testament and didn't find it. I've found lot of places where it talks about behavior and action and sin, but where does it specify the sinner's prayer?"

"Well, there are several places that talk about God's grace and eternal life as a gift that can't be earned, but I don't recall seeing anything containing the sinner's prayer anywhere either."

Jeremy nodded. "I did find things like 'people draw nigh onto me with their lips but their heart is far from me'. Are lips like hands here? People say 'yes I believe' but then don't live like they do. And how about the part when Jesus told the disciples to go into the world and baptize in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit? It didn't say go forth into the world and ask people to raise their hands or say a little prayer. The baptism ritual seems to be a very important part of Christianity."

"You're right. It is. There's even a denomination named the Baptists that started because they preached that baptism is required for salvation," Maria said.

"My dad was telling me about that group. And that's another thing that drives me crazy. Why are there so many flavors of Christians? I mean there are the Catholics and the Presbyterians and the Lutherans and the Methodists and etcetera. What's up



with that?"

"I'm sorry, Jeremy, but I'm afraid I'm quite ignorant of all the different denominations. We have always gone to non-denominational churches or a Baptist church."

"So does Calvary belong to the Baptist or Methodist organizations or something?"

"No, they're a non-denominational church."

"So not only do we have all these different denominations, we have a bunch of Lone Ranger churches as well. How is a non-believer supposed to be able to make any sense of that situation?"

"Einstein, you have some very valid questions. Maybe you *should* talk to a pastor or something. I've been a Christian since I gave my heart to the Lord at the age of five. I just lived a Christian life. I haven't studied *all* the facts about Christianity. Frankly, I didn't find it important to understand all the nitty-gritty details." Maria buried her head in her hands.

"I'm sorry. I've overwhelmed you with my silly blubbing and made you feel uncomfortable. That wasn't my intention. I'm just trying to turn over all the stones that I find to discover what's underneath them and...."

"Jeremy, don't worry about it. You gotta do what you gotta do. I'm a big girl, and I need to be able to defend my faith against people who are openly hostile to the gospel. Building up my psyche to handle that is something I'll need to do. So what better way to do that than with someone who is questioning but actively seeking? So you see, you may make me uncomfortable a little, but I need to get out of my comfort zone because I'll be going places where it's more uncomfortable. You might say I'm in training."

"I know this might be hard for you to answer, but what if the Bible was totally just a history of people and not a divine revelation whatsoever?"

"You're right. That would be hard to answer. I'll take a stab at it, however. If the Bible isn't a blueprint from God to direct our lives, then we have no tangible evidence of God at all."

"Is it possible that God created us with some kind of built-in instinct, like a homing pigeon, that would point us toward him? And our eternal future would depend on whether we followed that instinct or not?"

"Well, first of all, the idea of eternal life is found in the Bible. How would we even know that eternal life was a possibility if the Bible hadn't mentioned it? And where is there evidence of this

instinct you're talking about?" Maria asked.

"Conscience. We seem to have a built-in knowledge of right and wrong. The world's religions seem to all include the concept of good and evil and love and hate."

"You're right there. There are lots of Christians who will testify about how God has touched their lives, sometimes miraculously."

"Are there people in other religions who claim the same?" Jeremy asked.

"Maybe."

"What if God isn't God of the Christians, or God of the Jews, or God of the Arabs, or God of the Hindus, etcetera, but is simply God of all people who love goodness?"

"I don't know. That just goes against everything I've always believed."

"Well, to be perfectly honest, Maria, I've arrived at the conclusion, based on my reading and research, that these bodies we inhabit could not have just developed by chance. There had to be a designer. If that designer isn't the God portrayed in the Bible, then who the heck is it, and why did he or they just create us and leave us in the dark?"

Jeremy was starting to get animated again. "To put it bluntly, when I look at Christianity, it's like watching that old TV show where the contestants had to guess who the real person was that did something. At the end they said 'would the real so and so please stand up.' I want to say 'will the real Christianity please stand up.' It was really tough nailing down the definition of evolution when there were only two major varieties. With Christianity we seem to have a whole smorgasbord to choose from."

"Ironically, Jeremy, you've been making more statements than asking questions today."

"Maybe so. I'm sorry. I kind of got wound up. These things have been a burr under my saddle for a while now, and once I got going with them, the momentum just picked up. Forgive me if it sounded like I was beating you over the head with these questions...I mean statements."

"That's OK. One thing I'd like to say is that I've heard lots of sermons about grace versus works. I always heard pastors say that we're saved by grace and not by what we do. The funny thing I could never figure out is who they were arguing with. All of these other pastors were saying the same thing. Perhaps they were talking about non-believers trying to make it to Heaven by being good."

"The pastor said today that faith without works is dead. Are grace and faith interchangeable?"

"OK. I officially give up as your mentor in this search. You've gone into water that's too deep for me already. You need a theologian to guide you."

"What about the list of books? Are there any there that will help me?" Jeremy asked.

"You mean help us. I'm in on this project too, you know."

"I knew that. Sometimes I forget that just because you're a Christian, you still don't necessarily have a broad knowledge of doctrine and history, etcetera. I was always amazed at how little some of my football teammates knew about football."

"Obviously you paid very close attention to what you found in the New Testament and took good notes. Perhaps, you can share those scripture references with me, so I can check out those passages?"

"No problem. I have to admit, Maria, that Jesus is a compelling figure. His story is extraordinary. I've heard it said that he was either the Son of God, a liar, or a lunatic. After seeing what punishment he went through for his declaration that he was the Messiah, I would limit it to two choices. Liars tend to run when their lies are discovered. Not only did Jesus stand and take the punishment, he did it with class. The part where he forgave the Roman soldiers who abused him was classic. And the fact that his disciples went out into the world and suffered abuse and death in order to testify of their Messiah leads me to believe that Jesus is the Son of God. That's why I'm so animated about the differences between the Bible and the things I see taught."

"That's wonderful news, Jeremy. I knew that once you allowed your heart to do the seeing you would find that he is the way, the truth, and the life."

"Now I need to work out some details. As I said before, I will not live a lie, so I'm going to follow truth where it leads, not where some people want me to go, no matter how good their intentions are. I might be wrong, but it seems hypocritical to accuse evolutionists of holding to unjustified beliefs and then hang on to beliefs that are just as unsupportable about religion. I have to think that God would have made his blueprints for human life to be logical and orderly – just like his universe."

"Jeremy, you have to remember one thing. Not everyone is as blessed in the intellectual realm as you are. God wouldn't make people with lower intelligence if salvation required them to understand all the complexities of life. He had to make it

something so simple that even a child could understand. In fact, Jesus said unless you become as a small child, you will in no way enter the kingdom of Heaven."

"I really think we need to create some kind of chart that shows us all of the relevant points that we need to note and, perhaps, learn. Statements like that should go on it. What must man do to inherit eternal life? We have one answer from the hand-raising theory of just saying the sinner's prayer and getting your ticket. I want to list all the arguments against that philosophy to see which one stacks up. Whenever I think about that sinner's prayer, I always wonder what happens if the person reneges on their promise. What if they just draw near with their lips and not with their hearts?"

"In actuality, I guess they were never saved."

"Well, how would a person know if they were saved? From what I've seen, salvation isn't a one-time action. For example, I found a website today created by some ex-pastors. They're trying to debunk Christianity. These are guys that not only said the sinner's prayer but led other people to do the same. Now they're out to persuade people to give up their faith or to never accept it in the first place. Were they not quote-unquote saved when they were pastors?"

"Come to think about this, Einstein, I've read a passage in the Bible that says, 'he that endures to the end will be saved.' That passage has always troubled me. When people talk about eternal security, I want to point out that passage and question them."

"What's eternal security?"

"One way of saying it is 'once saved always saved'. You can't lose your salvation once you have it."

"I'm sorry, but that sounds a little over the top for me. These debunkers are now the sworn enemies of God. How could they possibly be allowed into Heaven? Why would they even want to go to Heaven? Oh, yeah. I have another passage that speaks to that issue. Hold on." He rifled through his notes until the 'Eureka' look lit up his face. "Here it is. *Matthew* 7:21-24 'Not every one that says unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that does the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in your name? and in your name have cast out devils? and in your name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity. Therefore whosoever hears these sayings of mine, and does them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his

house upon a rock.' This is saying to me that people who were believers are going to miss the final cut because they didn't heed the words of Jesus and were involved in iniquity. I looked up that word and it means sin, evil, or injustice."

"That's a pretty hard argument. I don't mean difficult to argue with but difficult to accept."

"I know. Believe me, Maria, I know. But I don't think God wants you to run away from difficult things. Two of the ideas that stood out in my reading were the metaphors of the potter's clay and the refining fire for creating gold. It really seemed to me that God is interested in molding character and humility and strength and beauty from the inside out. Maybe I'm missing the boat, but that's what I saw." Jeremy heaved a big sigh and walked over to the fake fireplace. He stared into the fake flames licking at the glass.

A hand touched his shoulder. He turned and faced Maria. Her searching eyes locked onto his. The compassion literally flowed from her. "Jeremy, I'm very impressed with the enthusiasm you've shown in tackling this new project. And I know that some people don't want to follow Jesus enough to leave their comfort zone. Sometimes I've thought that the gospel might be oversimplified and made too easy."

"How does the phrase 'watered down' fit? Maria, you know another passage that stuck out like a skyscraper in the desert was the statement that if we don't take up our own cross and follow Jesus, we aren't worthy of him. Is that a small print item that the people who are led to the sinners prayer find out later? Every Sunday or Tuesday night I hear this call to come to Jesus and accept his free gift. They just fail to mention that Jesus said to bear a cross and not wear a cross."

"Are you saying I shouldn't wear a cross around my neck?"

"No, no, no. I was just using that as a comparison of how some people seem to think that putting on a piece of jewelry makes them a Christ follower. That's an outward sign of what should be inside them."

"Gotcha. And you're right. Also I've thought about that cross-bearing passage myself. It seemed to me that Jesus was talking about figurative crosses here. He didn't want us all literally crucified. Who would carry out his work on Earth if that happened?"

"What do you mean by a figurative cross? Please, give me an example."

Maria grasped the cross around her neck and examined it

closely. "What I mean is that in life we sometimes have to take a painful course to obey God. For example, he says to love your enemies. That takes courage and conviction and a form of sacrifice. Speaking of the 'S' word, we often sing a song about bringing the sacrifice of praise into the house of the Lord. Giving thanks and praise when we want to be cool and sophisticated and independent is like a figurative cross. It's a burden we choose to carry. Or when someone says something that totally bends you out of shape, but instead of mouthing back, you turn the other ear. And sometimes this involves giving of ourselves to help others."

Jeremy began singing softly. *"He ain't heavy; he's my brother."*

Maria looked up at him with doe eyes gleaming from the glow of the fireplace. "Exactly, my friend. Exactly. By the way, you have a nice voice."

"I'm glad you think so. Otherwise I might be looking for a hole to crawl into right now."

"Actually it's very flattering that you trust me enough to go out on a limb like that."

"Well, in that case, I'm happy that I flattered you with my singing. We somehow got a double blessing. Now, I suggest we put aside our serious conversation of salvation and share our book lists. Also, I think it would be a good idea to visit some other types of churches."

"What types, Jeremy?"

"Any and all of them. We're turning over stones, right? How better to learn about someone than by dropping by to see them in action? It beats the heck out of reading about them in a book. I should know after our last adventure."

"Wow. That would be different. It would take months to visit just the local churches. You know what I've always wanted to do?"

"Not until you tell me."

"Visit a Jewish synagogue."

"Do synagogues come in any other flavor than Jewish?"

"Funny. Actually, maybe what I really meant was a Jewish-Christian fellowship. I think I'd feel funny going to a synagogue. I'd feel like the people were worried I was going to convert someone to Christianity."

"That brings up another topic. Why do the Jewish people reject Jesus as the Messiah they have long awaited? He was one of them."

"Excellent question, Einstein. I suggest that you find the answer and share it with me."

"You've got a deal, Princess."

Mrs. Masterson walked into the room. "Can I interest anyone in some cookies, fresh out of the oven?"

"That's a pretty dumb question, Mom. You know how I love still-warm cookies. And you also know that teenage boys eat anything that isn't nailed down, so I believe the answer is a resounding yes."

As they were headed into the kitchen, Jeremy said, "Anything that's not nailed down? I think you might have us teenage boys confused with goats?"

"Maybe you're right. There's quite a bit of similarity there so you can see where I'd make the mistake. I better stay away from petting zoos."

"I'm not going to touch that comment with a ten-foot pole."

"How about an eleven-foot Swede?" Maria responded.

"What? Is that supposed to be a joke? I don't get it if it is."

"Oh, golly. I hate it when I have to explain them. You know what they call the people from Poland?"

"I can never pronounce their names."

"No, silly, I mean a person from Poland is known as a 'Pole'. So you said you wouldn't touch my comment with a...forget it. Let's eat cookies."

"By the way, Maria, if you and I get married, you'll make the cookies, and I'll make the jokes."

"Well, Preppie, if you're not going to let me participate in the humor, I'm afraid there wouldn't be any cookies baked either, among other goodies that would be left untasted."

"I stepped on my tongue again, didn't I?"

Maria nodded emphatically. "Yeah!"

"I was just messin' with ya. In reality, I think you're pretty funny."

"Really?"

"But looks aren't everything."

"Do you want me to reload my cannons?" she asked.

Jeremy took a big bite of cookie and looked around the kitchen as he chewed. Maria waited patiently to get his attention again. He turned back toward the table again to grab another cookie. After he secured the prize, he looked up at Maria with a look of innocence. She was flashing her mean look. "What?" JD blurted out.

"You were ignoring me. That wasn't very nice."

"Oh, and it's nice to threaten a broadside attack?"

"My cannons are filled with marshmallows. You know that."

"In that case, do you have any hot chocolate?"

"Go fish!"

"Season doesn't open until April."

"Oh, brother. Jeremy, I'm starting to wonder if there's any happy medium to your conversations. You're either talking way over my head about weighty matters, or else you're totally without seriousness to the point of being silly."

"I'm a complex man."

"And aren't we all?"

"You're a complex man, too?"

"You know what I meant."

"I hope you don't get mad at me for saying this, but for a Christian, you don't seem to know much about your religion."

"That bugs me a little bit, but let me say this. I have a song by a group called For Him. It's called *Center of the Mark*, and it tells how the bull's-eye that Christians are supposed to aim for is to love God and love people. That's where I've put my focus, not on turning the gospel into intellectual gymnastics."

"Maybe I'm wrong, Maria, but there seems to be an intellectual challenge to your religion. Seems to me that the best way to take it on is to fight back with knowledge and facts."

"Maybe you're right, but maybe people need love more than they need an overpowering argument to sweep aside their skepticism. I have an idea to show you what my faith walk is like."

Mrs. Masterson walked into the kitchen and put some dishes in the dishwasher. "So, how are the cookies?"

"Great as always, Mom."

"Thanks, Mrs. M., but those first five just didn't give me enough material to base my opinion on. I'm going to have to sample a couple of more to make sure."

Maria's mother laughed. "Have as many as you want. Maria, it's nice you picked out a boy with a sense of humor and a half."

Maria rolled her eyes. "Mom, you're half right, the part about the half. Don't encourage his delusion of being Robin Williams."

"That's not true. I'm more on the low-key humor bandwagon. Maybe the next Seinfeld."

"Now I think I'm going to lose my cookies."

"Thanks for sharing that with us. I hope that you won't be sharing the cookies as well." Jeremy pretended to cover his eyes.

"See, Mom, what you've done. You've unleashed a monster!"

"OK. I'm outta here. I'll let you two lovebirds feud in peace." She began to exit the room.

"Mom, is it OK if I take Jeremy into my bedroom?"



## Chapter 4

### In the Throne Room

Mrs. Masterson halted and looked over at Jeremy, who was close to a state of shock. "OK, but leave the door open." She continued her exodus.

Jeremy's forehead asked the question that his mouth was unable to force out.

"It's time you and I share something very wonderful," Maria said. She grabbed Jeremy by the hand and pulled him away from the cookie plate. They proceeded toward Maria's private quarters, a place that Jeremy had never visited before.

He'd never even been in the upstairs of the Masterson house. As they climbed the stairs together, it dawned on Jeremy that he'd never been in any girl's bedroom before. *Why is she taking me here?*

Maria flipped on a light switch as they entered the door. The illumination allowed Jeremy to see what his imagination had been unable to drum up during the short walk to their destination. This was no typical teenager's room. There were a couple of pictures on the wall. One of them was a man with a beard and long hair. The other was a picture of the beach with footprints etched into the sand. A poem was written over one half of the picture. "Is that a picture of Jesus?"

"Yes, in fact, it's my favorite picture of Jesus."

He read the poem and understood that it was about Jesus carrying a person through the sand during tough times. Jeremy then surveyed the rest of the room. Her bed was a twin with an attractive bedspread. Everything was neat and color coordinated with the dominant colors being maroon and white. He spotted a bookcase with various items on it and walked closer to inspect them. He picked up a trophy and read it out loud. "2005 South Dakota State Cross-Country Champion." *Must be the team championship. Hold on, this is the individual champ, and there's Maria's name.* "Holy cow, Maria. You never told me you won the state meet!"

"You never asked."

"Why would I ask? Who goes around asking people if they won the state cross-country meet? Gosh. I didn't even know if you

were good or not, and then I find out you were the state champ. And you quit the team this year so you could focus on your dad's dream!"

"Yes, I did. It wasn't an easy decision to make, but I'm glad I did now."

Jeremy picked up some medals that lay near the trophy. "First place 1600 meter 2006 State Track Meet. First place 3200 meter. Sheesh. You were a stud!"

"Ah, Jeremy, I don't think that word's applied to females."

"Huh? Oh, yeah. I guess you're right. Well, you were a 'studette', or something like that. Are you going to run track at Sumner this spring?"

"I'm not sure yet. Probably."

"State A Basketball Tournament – Runner up 1972. This one is obviously not yours since you hadn't been born yet."

"That's my dad's. The story of that one goes along with that document you found on the wall downstairs."

"So are these trophies what you brought me up here to see?"

"Not even close. I forgot these were even here."

She grabbed his hand and pulled him over to the bed. "I want you to exercise some of that trust that you've always had in me. Trust me that this will be an experience that you will never forget, but you have to relax and let yourself go."

"OK. What else do I need to do?"

"Just kneel down there next to the bed. I'll be right back. I'm going to put on something very comfortable." She walked over to her dresser and opened it. After surveying the contents, she pulled out a CD and inserted it into a machine on the table. She hurried back over to Jeremy's side and knelt next to him. The music began to play. "Now close your eyes and just listen. Let your spirit have free rein."

Jeremy felt her hand clasp his. He didn't open his eyes and tried to focus on the music instead of her soft hand.

*'Jesus, we enthrone you. We proclaim you are king.  
Standing here in the midst of us. We raise you up with  
our praise.*

*And as we worship build a throne. And as we worship  
build a throne.*

*And as we worship build a throne. Come Lord Jesus and  
take your place.'*

JD didn't know what he was supposed to think. With the age

of kings long gone, he had never considered what it was like to kneel down and pay homage to a sovereign. He envisioned Sir Lancelot and Sir Galahad bowing before King Arthur. The music was beautiful with violins sprinkled in to elevate a mystical melody. To top things off, Maria added her voice to the music. He felt a warmth in his chest. That peaceful feeling he had gotten whenever they prayed was back, stronger than ever. *Is this what Maria refers to as spirit-to-spirit communication?*

The song ended and Jeremy opened his eyes to take a peek at Maria. She was holding her free arm up in the air toward the ceiling. Another song began, so Jeremy closed his eyes again and tried to focus on the words.

*'This is my hiding place. This is my secret place.  
Receive my love and grace. As we stand face to face.'*

As he listened to the song, he realized this was Maria's secret place. This was where she went to communicate with God. This is what she did instead of studying religion and understanding doctrine. Within this peace there was no clashing of opinions and controversy. It was just a flow of something pure and stimulating that Jeremy, if forced to put a name to it, would have referred to as 'love'. As the third song played, his mind began to wander off the music. He became aware that his knees hurt. *How long is she going to do this?* With the infusion of external thoughts, he found that the feeling inside vanished. He was left alone with his knee pain, his thoughts, and Maria's hand.

When the third song finished, Maria released his hand, got up from her kneeling position and turned off the music. Jeremy rolled over to his side and sat on the floor with his legs straight out to give him maximum relief from the sore knees.

"Well, Einstein, now you know my secret. This is how I recharge my spiritual batteries so I'm able to live the kind of life that I feel God has called us all to live. You might think I'm nutz, and that's your prerogative, but without this, I would never be able to stand up to the pressures of life the way I do."

"I don't know what to say. It was a beautiful and almost indescribable experience. Why do you raise your hands?"

"To tell you the truth, Jeremy, I'm not sure what the purpose is. Maybe it acts like an antenna on a radio that gets better reception. One way of looking at it is an act of surrender, and another is that I lift up my hands to receive from the Lord."

"Receive what?"

"Love. Peace. Energy. Wisdom. Joy."

"How do you explain it?"

"I don't know exactly. There are some interesting theories out there. One is that God has a frequency like a radio station. In order to get clear reception of that signal, we need to adjust our receivers. Another idea is that we need to empty ourselves of worldly ideas in order to let God fill us up with his."

"Like the Death Star scene. Luke had to empty himself to let the force take over. Is this a force like magic – Harry Potter type stuff?"

"Witchcraft, as portrayed in Harry Potter and other books and movies, is from the dark side of the force, if you want to use Star Wars terminology. The Bible says the sin of rebellion is similar to witchcraft. Witches give worship to Satan, though they might not acknowledge that, which allows words they speak to have power."

"Are you saying there really are such things as witches?"

"Yeah! And demons too."

"I think we talked about this once before. The demons are the other angels that got kicked out of Heaven?"

"Exactly. People who dabble in the occult open themselves up to attack by Satan and his soldiers, if you want to look at them in that light. This is one area where I've done some study. We've already discussed how Satan tries to draw people away from God by using evolution to persuade them that God doesn't exist. He has several other lines of attack. Perhaps his most powerful is the world of the occult."

"I'm sorry, Maria. I just have a little trouble swallowing all of this. Are you saying that Harry Potter is evil? Those books are like the most popular ones on the market, and the movies are too. It's just good kids' type fantasy, just like *Snow White* and *Sleeping Beauty*."

"You really think so, huh? Well let's go down to the computer and do some surfing. If you're going to research religion thoroughly, you can't omit the dark side of the force. Before we start, let me leave you with an analogy. If you take a frog and throw it in a pot of hot water, it will jump out because the heat causes pain. Take that same frog and put it in cool water and then heat the water up gradually. The frog adjusts to the hotter and hotter temperatures and stays in the pot until it's cooked. I believe Satan is using that tactic against humans. Start with something innocent and fun and then gradually introduce the more sinister aspects of magic. Finally the full-blown doctrine is accepted by many and not objectionable to those who don't embrace it

because they got comfortable with it in stages."

"This is like too freaky. Please don't be offended, Maria, but it sounds like you're coming out of left field with this theory. Let's go check it out, and you can provide your case for the prosecution."

The pair walked downstairs to the computer in the living room. Maria didn't take long to convince Jeremy that there was a ton of articles warning against the potential evil of Harry Potter.

"Maria, this simply shows, in their opinion, Harry is from the dark side. You've proven to me many people think this. That can't be used as evidence. It would be like saying evolution is proven to be true because eighty-five percent of scientists believe it. Show me some real facts, not opinions."

Modifying her search criteria, Maria was able to provide a list of websites for witches. She showed Jeremy the *Witches Bible* on Amazon.com. They even perused the book review on that writing. Maria started laughing.

"What's so funny, Princess?"

"Look at these two reviews! One of them talks about a 'convent' and another about a 'convenient'."

"Why is that funny? I don't get it."

"The term for a group of witches is 'coven'. A 'convent' is a place where nuns live, you know like in *Sister Act* with Whoopi Goldberg."

"Got it now. Not too many witches hanging out with the singing nuns, right?"

"This one isn't so funny. The one titled 'a review by a kid'. 'This was a really good book. It gave me a lot of clues on witchcraft. I love all the witchcraft and everything else.' I think you might chalk up this interest in witchcraft to Harry Potter and the power of the Internet."

"My head is spinning here, Maria. First you take me up the stairway to Heaven, and now you lead me down the escalator of Hell. Just when I think I have a handle on this spiritual playing field, something new comes along."

"Welcome to my world. I really thought the battle over evolution was complex, but that's just one ring of a several ring circus in the battle between Satan and God."

"Show me some more about witchcraft," Jeremy said.

She clicked on another link, and they found a site with an interesting picture with 'Spells and Magic' written over it. Jeremy read the text below. "'Spells, white magic, ceremonial magic, incantations, candle magic, black magic, conjurations, and invocations. It's all here to help you through life. If you believe in

the power of Magic, your dreams can come true. So be it! We all have needs in life and Magic can help fulfill those needs. Whether it be power, money, fame, revenge, love or hate... the universe can be bent to our will, and it can all be achieved with spells and magic."

"Are you getting the picture?"

"It seems like these people use their incantations somewhat like you use prayer."

"Bingo. They're appealing to a different source than the God who created them. And then we have some other areas of the occult too which fly under the radar of many people. The Bible says the devil is like a roaring lion, seeking those whom he can devour."

"So the Star Wars comparison seems to be appropriate. There's a spiritual dark side and good side. Seems like some people ignore the spiritual realm altogether, like my family was doing. Others seek God, or they seek his enemy. That brings up more questions. What about white magic, which is supposed to be good?"

"Oxymoron. Magic isn't of God. The Bible even talks about the fact the devil may appear as an angel of light."

"You mean he can impersonate goodness to lead a person to evil?"

"That seems to be the case. Pretty scary, huh? Jesus said that narrow is the path that leads to eternal life and broad is the path that leads to destruction."

"That seems to indicate that it's easier to go to Hell than to arrive in Heaven."

"Jeremy, I wished I could argue with you on this point, but it really does seem that way. Going back to what you said earlier about the escalator to Hell, there seem to be lots of elevators going down also. I think this information about evil might be vital when you search for truth. It seems that Satan may set up some situations where it appears that people find truth but actually are caught up in lies that cause them to quit searching for the truth."

"Because they think they already have it. Did you ever see any of the old *Mission Impossible* TV episodes?"

"My dad used to mention them, but I never saw any," Maria said.

"They were great! The Mission Impossible team had disguises and would create facial masks to impersonate people and would build fake scenes to make people think they were somewhere else. They'd do and say things to either make the person reveal

the information they needed or to cause him to do something they wanted to get done. Like getting rid of a bad leader or something. I'm not doing a very good job describing them, but what I am trying to say is they manipulated people through deceiving them. I guess you just had to be there, so I'll bring over a DVD sometime and let you see for yourself."

"Sounds interesting and sounds a lot like how Satan works, too."

"All this talk about evil gives me the willies. I think it's time to get back to the God side of things. What about the list of books you compiled?"

"Works for me. Here's what I have so far." Maria opened up a document and pointed with her finger as she talked. "This guy here, Lee Strobel, seems to be right up your alley. He was an atheist newspaperman who set out to prove that Christianity was bunk. He sought out evidence the way a detective would. This book, *Case for a Creator*, is one we should have read for our evolution research. Better late than never. As you can see, he has lots of books where he presents the case for a specific aspect of Christianity. *Case for Christmas* and *Case for Easter* are very short books. His manner of investigating these subjects was to fly all over to talk to experts in their field concerning the birth and death of Jesus. *Case for Christ* and *Case for Faith* are full-sized books. This dude has done all the legwork for us, Jeremy."

"Cool. This sounds like exactly what the doctor ordered. What else you got?"

"FYI, these books also spurred the release of rebuttal books by the opposition so you might check them out to see what evidence they counter with. Another guy who investigated Christianity was Josh McDowell. He was also a nonbeliever who went on a journey to disprove Christianity and has now written seventy-seven books to support it, including *More Than a Carpenter* and *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*. C. S. Lewis is the guy who wrote the books about Narnia. His book *Mere Christianity* is a good one. *The Screwtape Letters* gets into Satan's influence. Phillip Yancy has several books here. A couple that looked interesting to me are *I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist* and *Letters From a Skeptic: A Son Wrestles with His Father's Questions about Christianity*."

"That last one sounds really interesting. I should have read that one a couple of months ago. Here's one that sounds right up my alley: *Who Made God?*"

"Yeah, if you read that book, maybe you'll quit asking me

where God came from."

"Oh come on, Maria, I only asked twice."

"So far. Anyway, I'll do one last sweep to see if there are any other books I should include here and e-mail this to you this evening."

"And then I'll hit my dad up for his credit card, so I can order some of these. Hopefully I can get the used cheapies. Looks like you found some really good stuff here, and I can't wait to get started."

"Well, you don't have to wait. Hold on a sec." Maria walked over to the bookcase near the fireplace and surveyed the contents for a minute before pulling two small books off the shelf and returning. She held one book out to him. "This was one of my dad's favorites. I read it a long time ago and don't remember specifics, but I do remember this was a great read. This guy also wrote a bunch of books, which you'll see on the list."

Jeremy took the book from her and read the cover. "*God Tells the Man Who Cares*. That describes me. What's the other one?"

"Same author, A. W. Tozer. This one is perhaps his most famous." She handed the one entitled *The Pursuit of God* to Jeremy.

"Interesting. That's exactly what I'm trying to do. Hopefully he's not trying to run away from my pursuit."

"No chance of that, Jeremy. He wants to be found."

Jeremy looked at his watch. "Speaking of being found, I better wrap this up and get home where my dad expects to find me in a half-hour. I'll soon be enjoying the delicious dinner he's supposed to prepare tonight. What I want to accomplish before I go home is to make a list of questions that we must answer in this investigation."

Maria grabbed her notebook off the desk. "OK, speak to me, Einstein, and I'll jot it down. I'll copy it into an e-mail later, so we both have it."

"Perfect. OK, so let's stipulate that God is real and is the quote-unquote designer and creator of the universe and life. So question one: Is the God of the Bible the creator? Number two: Is Jesus the Son of God?"

"Slow down, Einstein, I'm not a professional secretary or whatever they call those people these days."

Jeremy waited for Maria to catch up. "Of course if we answer question one in the negative, then question two has to be 'no' as well."

"No doubt. I'm ready for more."



"Number three: Are we saved by grace, by works, or by a combination of the two?" He paused until Maria stopped writing.

"Number four: What works must we perform to be saved?"

"Assuming that the answer to question three is 'works'?"

"And also if the answer is a combination."

"You're right. My bad."

"Number five: Is the Bible totally without error?"

"Got it. Is that all?"

"How about this one? Is there a true church of God or are all churches created equal?"

"That one could be a real can of worms and maybe can't be answered by either A or B."

"That could be true. When you type these up, leave lots of space between each question so we can fill in information as we find it."

"Sir, yes, sir!"

"At ease, Private Masterson. Watch your step, or I'll be forced to bust you down to Public Masterson."

"That's a major bust!"

"No, that's a private bust!"

"You're flirting with the word 'incorrigible', again."

"I hope I have more results flirting with 'incorrigible' than I do flirting with you."

"What do you mean by that comment?"

"What comment? I didn't mean—"

Maria started to poke Jeremy in the ribs with her finger almost as if to the beat of a metronome. "You, buster, better butter banana bread backwards before breakfast, buddy." With each word and each poke he stumbled backwards.

Coinciding with the arrival of the last word he ran into the wall and was trapped. As she reached out to poke him one more time, he grabbed both her arms and held them to the side. Then he used his strength to maneuver her in such a manner that she ended up pressed against the wall and he became the trapper instead of the trapee. "Are you trying to make me the first assassination victim to die of alliteration?" He pinned her arms against the wall. *What do I do for an encore?* Their eyes locked and prompted Jeremy to begin lowering his face towards hers.

"Hand check!"

Jeremy dropped Maria's arms like the proverbial hot potato and whirled in the direction of the intruding voice. "Hi, Mrs. M. Maria and I were just discussing...poetry."

"Yes, I could see that. Looked like you were about to break

into iambic pentameter."

Jeremy's face felt as red as his shirt. He stared at the carpet as if he was trying to burn a hole in it.

Mrs. Masterson didn't prolong his agony by making him suffer in silence. "Sorry to interrupt your rhyming couplets, but I thought maybe you'd like to take some cookies home for your dad and you to share."

"That'd be great, Mrs. Masterson. My dad really likes kissing...I mean cookies."

Maria's mother broke into a peal of laughter and retreated to the kitchen to retrieve a bag of goodies.

Jeremy looked over at Maria, who was grinning. "Smooth maneuver, Hoover."

"It was your fault, Princess. You were threatening to poke that finger of yours right through my ribcage into my heart."

"Again?"

"Funny. You know, any jury in the country will find me innocent by reason of self-defense."

"I was figuring you had a better chance using an insanity plea."

Jeremy started towards her. She squealed with laughter as she ran toward the safety of the kitchen. "Come on and get me, Preppie!"

He stopped and stood there shaking his head. *How do you solve a problem like Maria?*

## Chapter 5

### A Tug on the Strings of the Heart

Jeremy thought about the second kiss he almost had as he drove home with the stash of chocolate chip snacks, the two books, and the memories of his embarrassment. *I think I can understand why I'm not permitted in the house without Maria's mom being present. After today, she probably won't leave us alone in the same room together.*

He entered the house right at that magic moment dinner was scheduled to begin. His dad looked up from the oven and smiled. "Good timing. I was just about to call Maria's to see if you'd gotten tied up."

Jeremy studied his dad closely. *Does he know something about this afternoon? Maybe he did call and is pretending he didn't, and Maria's mom told him about the poetic wrestling match.* "Only thing tied up is my tongue."

"That's too bad. It might be hard eating lasagna with your tongue wrapped in knots."

"Don't think so, Dad. I could eat lasagna if my tongue was staked to the ground with the golden spike from the great railroad celebration in Utah."

"Interesting concept, but let's not experiment tonight."

"Works for me." Jeremy set the books on a chair and the cookies on the counter.

"What you got there?"

"Chocolate chip cookies. Culinary caresses coming to your kitchen compliments of a cute cook."

"What's with the alliteration?"

"I guess you might say it's Maria's influence rubbing off on me."

"OK. It's Maria's influence rubbing off on me."

"Now I know where I got the incorrigible gene."

"And don't you ever forget it."

"Believe me. It won't let me. Let's quit bantering and eat. Those seven cookies I had this afternoon have worn off already."

"Seven! It's a good thing Maria made a big batch, or I would have gone cookieless in Seattle."

"Dad, Maria is cute, but she wasn't the cook. Lisa made

them."

"Oh. Oh! That's a horse of a different carousel."

"Carousel?"

"Just keeping you on your toes. Making up my own clichés. So, round up your plate and fill her up."

"Am I going to need to check the oil on this lasagna?"

"Too bad you got the incorrigible gene and not the humor gene."

"Well, Dad, if I inherited your wit, we'd be a witty family because two halfwits make a whole."

"It's not too late to repossess this lasagna."

"I got the hint. You know, Father dear, you really should quit your day job to become a stand-up comedian."

"Why thank you, Jeremy. I just might have to do that. By the way, how would you feel about me coming to work at the high school?"

"Are you serious? Do they have an opening for a stand-up comic?"

"Neither of the two biology teachers seem to want to teach the evolution-free version when the second semester starts. I've been thinking about talking to one of them about swapping jobs with me."

"Interesting. Well, it wouldn't be a big deal to me. I've already taken biology."

"That would be weird having your own kid for a student."

"Not half as weird as having your dad for an instructor."

Jeremy got going with his fork and forgot about dueling with his father. *Lasagna should be considered a mood modifier.*

"So what are the books you brought home?" his dad asked.

"Some Christian books Maria lent me. That reminds me. Tonight, Maria is sending me a list of books to purchase. So, friends, Romans, and father, please lend me your credit card."

"Great. I spend hours slaving over dinner and my reward is giving you free rein with my Visa card. No good deed goes unpunished."

"How would you know? It's your first one!"

"Oh, you're in rare form tonight. You might even score a point on me before the evening is over."

"Shoot, I'm already in double figures and it's still the first quarter."

"Dream on, dream on, teenage queen."

"Huh? Queen?"

"Those are the words to a song. I couldn't bring myself to

change the words."

"Just don't start singing the Jeremy was a bullfrog one!"

"Before I get caught up in this intellectual ping-pong match and forget, I have a book for you to read as well."

"Oh, yeah. What's it?"

"One of my students brought it in. He heard about the hearing with the school board and thought I'd be interested in checking out this book. It was written by a man named Randall Niles, who was a former militant atheist. Apparently he did the same research we did into the evolution question, and then ended up researching Christianity just like we're trying to do."

"And what did he find?"

"How would I know? I just got the book. Usually reading the cover isn't sufficient for gleaning the information from it."

"No kidding. That'd be a cool trick. Like a Vulcan mind meld – just put your fingers between the covers of a book and suck all the information right into your brain."

"Fascinating, but I'm going to concentrate on sucking all this lasagna into my tummy."

"That'd be good, Dad. Some of it might actually make it up to your brain."

\* \* \*

Since his dad had done the cooking, Jeremy inherited the chore of cleaning the kitchen afterwards. His thoughts rambled through his weekend, from his Friday night heroics on the basketball court to the Sunday night dinner and mutual roast with his dad. He'd packed a lot of memories into this forty-eight-hour period. *The five-hour discussion with Maria was certainly not the lowlight of my weekend.* Today they had begun mapping out what they wanted to accomplish. *It's time to get the show on the road.*

He ascended to his bedroom, located his highlighters and began reading *The Pursuit of God*. Two hours later, he reluctantly put a bookmark in the spot he was reading and turned off the light. *Tomorrow I'll finish this one and start the second. It feels like I'm back in the investigative saddle again. Hopefully I won't develop saddle sores.*

\* \* \*

On Tuesday night Jeremy went to the youth group meeting at church. Maria had started attending the special sessions for high

school students, so it gave them a chance to spend some more time together, as well as learn some things. Unfortunately, that interruption didn't allow Jeremy to start reading his second book. When he'd been reading for several days in a row, it felt good to get a break, but he'd only been back at it for two days, and part of him wished to be moving down the road of knowledge. The youth pastor had a little trouble getting the kids to quiet down so he could begin his message. Finally, he won everyone's attention.

"Tonight I want to read you a special story. I'd paraphrase it and make it more exciting for you, but I don't want to mess up and lessen the impact of what I have to say. This is a true story, by the way. If you like this material and want to find more like it, you can read it at [www.sermoncentral.com](http://www.sermoncentral.com)."

Jeremy listened and chuckled to himself. *Yeah, right. That's what I need – more sermons. I'm sure I'll go right home and look some up.* He thought about a joke Maria had e-mailed him the other day. A little girl had gone to church for the first time and was asked about it when she came home. "The music was great, but the commercial was too long." Jeremy had been going to church long enough to know that sometimes he got a little restless having someone talking to him with no chance to dialogue. That scenario reminded him of Mr. Bogue's science class, and that wasn't a pleasant thought.

The youth pastor read:

"There was a pastor, who, before he gave his sermon for the evening, briefly introduced a guest minister who was in service. The pastor told the congregation that the guest minister was one of his dearest childhood friends, and he wanted him to have a few moments to greet the church and share whatever he felt would be appropriate for the service. With that, an elderly man stepped up to the pulpit and began to speak.

"A father, his son, and a friend of his son were sailing off the Pacific Coast when a fast-approaching storm blocked any attempt to return to shore. The waves were so high that the three were swept into the ocean as the boat capsized.

"Grabbing a rescue line, the father had to make the most excruciating decision of his life: to which boy he would throw the other end of the lifeline. He only had seconds to make the decision. The father knew that his son was a Christian, and he also knew that his son's friend wasn't. The agony of his decision could not be matched by the torrent of waves. As the father yelled out an 'I love you' to his son, he threw out the lifeline to his son's friend.

"By the time the father had pulled the friend back to the capsized boat, his son had disappeared beneath the raging swells into the black of the night. His body was never recovered.' By this time, the whole congregation was sitting up straight in the pews, anxiously waiting for the next words to come out of the old minister's mouth. 'The father knew his son would step into eternity with Jesus and couldn't bear the thought of his son's friend stepping into eternity without Jesus.

"Therefore, he sacrificed his son to save his son's friend.' With that the old man turned and sat back down in his chair as silence filled the room. The pastor again walked slowly to the pulpit and delivered a brief sermon. Within minutes after the service ended, two teenagers, whom the old man had noticed looking quite disinterested during most of his story, were at the old man's side.

"That was a nice story,' politely stated one of the boys. 'But, I don't think it was realistic for a father to give up his son's life in hopes that the other boy would become a Christian.'

"Well, you've got a point there,' the old man replied glancing down at the worn Bible. As a big smile broadened his narrow face, he once again looked up at the boys and said, 'It sure isn't realistic, is it? But I'm standing today to tell you that the story gives me a glimpse of what it must have been like for God to give up his only son for me. You see...I was the father and your pastor was my son's friend.'"

\* \* \*

Jeremy had been totally riveted on the speaker and the message he had just delivered. Thoughts of books to read, lasagna, first kisses, and basketball were cast far from him. He was on the ocean, ready to perish when a lifeline was thrown to him, instead of the son of the man throwing out the life preserver. *The man lost his son that day, but maybe God gained one as a result. Who knows if that man, who became a pastor, would have even become a Christian without the sacrifice of a father demonstrating love and an unshakeable faith in the eternal Father?*

Jeremy also looked at the story through the eyes of the other two participants. *What would it have been like to be the son who was denied the life preserver? What would have been his last thoughts as the water closed over his head and dropped the curtain on his life?* And then there was the father. Jeremy looked

over at Maria who was wiping away tears from her eyes and cheeks. *What if they had a son, and Jeremy was forced to choose between saving Maria's child or another boy?* The reality of having to deliver the message of that tragedy to her was almost within his reach using just his imagination. He shuddered. *Please, God, don't ever put me in that position.*

Pensively, Jeremy looked around the room. He had never seen this energy-packed group of youngsters so quiet. It was as if they were mourning as a community for one of their own who had perished. Perhaps they were also quietly rejoicing for another of their own whose life not only had been saved, but had also found his purpose for the rest of that life. It had entered his mind before, but never so forcefully as it did now, that Christianity wasn't a hobby, but rather a way of life. He wrote down in his notes [www.sermoncentral.com](http://www.sermoncentral.com) and put three exclamation points behind it.

Although the strength of the feeling inside him had subsided, Jeremy was still under the spell of the story he heard at church when he arrived home. The routine was starting to become clear to him. Inspiration and enthusiasm would cause wonderful feelings to come, but they never stayed. Things went back to the same normal level, no matter how badly he wanted to hang on to the feeling. *Is this just me, or is this human nature? I remember the earthquake we had a couple of years ago, which scared the crap out of me. I thought the fear of an earthquake was going to be with me every day for the rest of my life. Now I can barely remember the feeling I had at the time. Life seems to move on and levels out our emotional peaks and valleys. We probably couldn't handle being at one or the other extreme all the time.*

Paul arrived home shortly after Jeremy. They exchanged their family armshake and headed to the kitchen together for a late snack.

"So, what's up, Pops?"

"Pops? Where did you – forget it. Compared to what most teenagers use today, I'll settle for 'Pops'. For one thing, I finished that book, *What Happened To Me*, I left it upstairs for you."

"In the throne room?"

"No. I don't have to do that anymore, since we're on friendly terms."

"So how was it?"

"It was super. I wish I'd run across that book when we were doing the evolution research. Mr. Niles really did his legwork, first to shed himself of his Darwinian leanings, and then later to plant



the flag of Christianity in his foundation. One thing he did was study the prophecies of the Old Testament and then determined how many of them were fulfilled, most of them by Jesus. Very impressive."

"Cool. I'm going to start tomorrow. Hopefully the teachers will go easy with homework assignments, so I'll be able to read it all in one night."

"It wasn't very long. He really packed a lot of information into a few words and combined a formal topic with an informal delivery that made it easy to read."

"Great! I don't have lots of time to waste on fluff."

"Who does? Speaking of time, do you realize we're only five days away from Christmas?"

"Oh, my gosh. That's right. Whoo-hooo! I'll have lots of time to read during the break! Wait, you said the word 'Christmas'. You always referred to it as 'Winter Holiday' in the past. We never have celebrated quote-unquote Christmas."

"You're right. A lot of things have changed since last December, however. Your mother and I always talked about how great our Christmas holidays would be with our kids. She never even got *one*. That was one reason I ditched the celebrations. It was too painful to remember. Now I see that I was letting the past dictate my present. Your mother died, and there's nothing I can do about that, but I certainly can prevent her untimely death from killing me too. I thought maybe we could start a new tradition around here and revive an old one at the same time."

"Sounds cool, Dad. Are we going to go out and play George Washington at the tree farm?"

"We could do that, or we can use the artificial tree your mother and I used for the years we were married before you came along. I couldn't bring myself to throw it away, so I stashed it way up in the rafters of the garage. I might need your help getting it down."

"Not a problem."

"I was wondering...."

"That wasn't a complete sentence, Dad. Worse, it was an incomplete thought. Maybe, you should add some more words after 'wondering'." *Dad won't look me in the eye. He's acting almost like a timid teenager right now. What's up with that?*

"Maybe we...."

"Holy cow! Are we going to have to resort to surgical removal of this thought from your brain?"

"Do you think...Maria would like to spend Christmas Eve with

us?"

"I don't know. She probably wants to spend it with her mother."

"I was banking on that."

"Oh, you old fox, you. Maybe Lisa would like to spend Christmas Eve with us and Maria? Is that what you really meant?"

"Close enough for a horseshoe game. Do you have a problem with that?"

"If something gave me a chance to spend special time with Maria, I'd have difficulty finding a problem with it even using an electron microscope."

"I was also banking on that. So, will you do the honors of delivering the invitation?"

"Ah, the plot sickens. You want me to do the dirty work for you, huh?"

"Perhaps, you could consider this the work you have to do to pay for all those books I bought you the other night."

"Well, if you're going to blackmail people, Dad, it's better not to give the reward first and then threaten them later."

"Oh. Is that why it never works for me?"

"You're in luck. I happen to have some newfound Christmas spirit right now, and I'll make the call. Maria doesn't go to bed for fifteen minutes, so we're in luck." He picked up the phone and punched in the digits that represented the electronic identity of the Masterson household.

"Is that you, Einstein?"

"By any chance, would you and your mother have any interest in spending Christmas Eve with a pair of Dillons?"

"In other words with a pair of jokers? Works for me. Let me check with Mom to see what she thinks."

When Maria came back, she spoke a couple of sentences. Jeremy said, "OK, I understand. I'll let you go now. Sweet dreams." He hung up the phone and looked at his dad, who was wearing a face usually found on lottery contestants when the last digit of the winning is being read and all the first numbers have matched.

"Well, Dad...We have a date!"

The look of nervous anticipation on Mr. Dillon's face was replaced by one of sheer joy. *I've never seen Dad this giddy. He must have the love bug bad, too. It might be an interesting Christmas. Holy cow, this isn't only going to be my first Christmas with Maria, but it's going to be my first real Christmas. I have to buy some presents.*

The next night Jeremy interrupted his reading long enough to assist his father retrieve the Christmas tree from the garage. When the tree was standing in the living room, he began to walk away.

"Where you going, buster?" his dad asked.

"Back to my book. I have a goal to finish tonight."

"Well, I have a goal to finish decorating the Christmas tree tonight."

"Good for you, Dad. Goals are good to have! Hope you complete yours." He turned and started walking away again.

"But I thought you were going to help?"

"I don't know anything about decorating Christmas trees."

"Well, I don't...really...either."

"But you said you used to have a tree every year."

"That was for two years, and your mother did the decorating."

"Are you kidding me?"

"Not this time. I haven't a clue how to do this. I was raised in an atheistic household. Xmas was a four-letter word."

"Well, Dad, it can't be all that hard, but I'll talk to Maria. Maybe she'll come over and help."

"Awesome!"

"OK. Now, can I get back to my book?"

"What are you standing *here* for?"

Jeremy shook his head and looked at the ceiling. *Dads these days!* On the way to his room he grabbed the telephone, dialed Maria's number and waited for the perky voice that made his heart sing.

A voice on the other end said, "The number you dialed has been disconnected. If you have reached this number in error—"

"Nice try, Sunshine. I know your voice too well for you to disguise it and fool me. Besides, you don't sound anything like a recording."

"Well, thanks for popping my bubble. Was that the purpose of your call?"

"Actually only a byproduct. I called to see if you're doing anything tomorrow night. Dad and I have this little dilemma. We have a Christmas tree, but we don't know how to dress it."

"What? T-shirt, jeans, and Adidas won't work?"

"I guess I used the wrong word. I meant 'decorate' it."

"Ahh! And you want my woman's touch?"

Yes, I do, but the ten-foot-pole rule applies here. "That's about the size of it."

"Will your dad be there?"

"Hold on. Dad, do you have class tomorrow night?"

"Nope."

"So you'll be home if Maria comes over?"

"Yep."

"OK, Princess, the chaperone will be present, so don't try any funny stuff!"

"I'll be on my best behavior."

"Glad to hear it! Good night!"

Jeremy hung up the phone and returned to his bedroom where he dove back into the journey of Randall Niles. With the satisfied feeling of accomplishment which he always got when he read the last page, he closed the book with half an hour to spare. He looked up at the ceiling and thought about what he had just read. *It's amazing. Here is an atheist who went exploring for God and found the master lode, changing his life completely. On the other hand, there is John Loftus, who traveled the reverse course. How do I make sense out of this and find direction for my own life? I need to examine each of these cases in detail to figure out why and how this happened.*

He got out of bed and jumped into his computer chair. Within a moment he was exploring sites that matched his search criteria of 'God', 'atheist' and 'pastor'. *This looks interesting.*

Dave Schmelzer was an atheist until his early twenties. Throughout his teen years, Schmelzer became skeptical about God. He believed that discussion of God was moot since there could never be proof that he existed. One day, after wondering what was worth spending his life on, he came up with the thought, "What if the Christians are right?"

He said a prayer to the effect of, "God, I don't believe you're real, but if you are, today would be one great day to show me." Shortly after, he left the campus in his vehicle and got lost. Twice within ten minutes, in his attempt to find his way back to school, he ended up underneath floodlit crosses. His life was changed as a result, and a study of religion ensued, culminating in him becoming a pastor.

*Now there's a story I can relate to. I wonder if someone has compiled a book of interesting conversion stories, especially ones concerning pastors. That's what I need so I don't have to hunt all over the Internet to find each story.*

The next article revealed the story of a Danish Lutheran

pastor who was an atheist. He was removed from his position, and the people in the church protested. The article criticized the Lutheran Church for removing this wonderful man from his post as pastor just because he didn't believe in God and spoke out his ideas. *This is unbelievable! First of all that an atheist would be a pastor, but more so that some atheist writer suggests that the church is wrong is removing him. I guess that would be the ultimate solution to the Christian problem. Simply hire an atheist to be the pastor at every church, and soon Christianity wouldn't exist.* Jeremy stopped to ponder the power of a pastor. *How far will people trust, and how far will people go to follow a persuasive leader? Time for bed. I'll have to research that topic later as well as look for a book of conversion stories.*

\* \* \*

When Jeremy returned home from school the next afternoon, he discovered a handful of boxes on the porch. *Looks like books! Whooo-hoooo!* He took them into the house and dug them out of their containers. The first book revealed was *The Case for Christmas*. *Perfect timing! I can read this one before the celebration. What do Christians do on Christmas to celebrate? I better ask Maria about that.* One of the books he received looked really interesting. It was entitled *I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist*. He opened the cover and started to read.

The bold text in the introduction read: 'Finding the Box Top to the Puzzle of Life'. *Interesting. I never looked at it like that before. Our life could be compared to a puzzle and without knowing what the puzzle is supposed to look like when we finish, it would never be put together correctly.* He was intrigued and kept reading. The story featured a religious professor at college who told the students to leave their religious beliefs at home and taught the Bible in a way that mocked it. The author of the book was a student in the class and had enrolled because he was on a spiritual search. *This is exactly the kind of stuff I'm looking for! Unfortunately, I have to get my homework done first, and then Maria is coming over. I hate to wait, but I don't have any time until Saturday night.* Reluctantly, Jeremy put his new books away and started his homework assignments.

When the doorbell rang two hours later, Jeremy answered it to find Maria holding a big box. "What you got in there? Gigantic chocolates for me?"

"You wish. Actually, I brought over some of our Christmas

decorations, just in case you wanted to borrow them. We're not putting up a tree this year. Since we're spending Christmas Eve over here, it would be nice to see some of our old friends hanging on your tree."

"Ahh. I think we can accommodate that request. I have no clue what we have to decorate the tree. I was thinking about stringing lasagna noodles."

"That would be...unique."

"I thought so. The spaghetti sauce might drip on the carpet though."

"Speaking of carpet, were you gonna let me come in?"

"Oh, yeah. Good idea. Won't you come in?" He grabbed the box out of her hands and stepped aside so she could enter.

"Funny you should ask."

Jeremy led her to the Christmas tree and set the box down beside it. "These other boxes here have junk in them. Use what you want to from them and mix in your stuff the way you want to. You have free rein over this whole process."

"Sounds good. Be aware, at no time will my hands leave my arms. This isn't rocket science, so even you, Einstein, should be able to pick up on this pretty quickly."

"Thanks for your vote of confidence."

"First we string the lights. I hope you have some of those. A Christmas tree without lights is like a gymnasium without basketball hoops." She started exploring the boxes to see what goodies she could uncover. "Ah-hah. One box full of the Christmas lights." She pulled out a snakelike cord and handed it to Jeremy. "The key with lights is to get them balanced so there's symmetry in the positioning. In other words, you don't want a bunch of lights over here and none over there. Capeesh?"

"I get it. Elementary, my dear Masterson."

Together they maneuvered the string of lights around the tree until Maria was satisfied that she had achieved the balance she sought. "Now plug the lights in, and we'll find out how many of them still work. After eighteen years, you might have to buy all new bulbs."

Jeremy did as he was instructed. A myriad of red, green, white, yellow and blue illuminators splashed their color onto the white carpet below and the white wall behind the tree. Some of the bulbs hadn't lit up.

"Here's a little trick. Watch closely now, and you'll be able to try this one at home. Grab a bulb that's not lit and make sure it's screwed in securely." She grabbed a red one that was dark and

gave it a twist. The red color came to life. "Bingo!"

Jeremy tried one, but nothing happened. "This looks like a dud."

"No problem, I hope. There are some spares in this box. Just unscrew that one and put this one in." She handed him a bulb and went back to testing the other malfunctioning lights. Within minutes every socket had a functioning bulb. "Another trick here. These lights in themselves are pretty but the light isn't concentrated and loses some of the effect. Check this out." She reached into a box and extracted a little metallic contraption that looked like a flower. She unscrewed one of the bulbs, put the flower-like ring over the light receptacle, and then screwed the bulb back in. When the bulb lit up, Jeremy could see how the light was reflected off the shiny metal and thus shone out instead of getting lost in the shadow of the tree.

"That's cool. Looks a lot better."

"I know. There's a little story about reflection I wanted to share with you. The Bible says that Jesus is the light of the world. We, on the other hand, are incapable of producing our own light. We can only reflect the light of the son, s-o-n, just like the moon can only reflect the light of the s-u-n. So remember this little tidbit when we talk about faith versus works."

"Got it. OK, what do we put on the tree next?"

Mary started singing. "*Silver balls, it's Christmas time in the city.*" She reached into her box and pulled out a silver ornament with white lace. "Here again, Einstein, we need to have balance. I'll attach this ornament right here with this little hook, hanging it over the branch like that." She hung the ornament and glanced over at Jeremy. "Now we repeat as necessary and fill in gaps where there's no ornament or lights. Got it?"

"Got it and starting to get the Christmas spirit.  $E=mc^2$ ."

"What does the theory of relativity have to do with Christmas?"

"Enthusiasm = Maria times Christmas squared."

"Nice. My dad told me that his favorite time of year, when he was a boy in elementary school, was Christmas. The kids would gather in the hallway at lunchtime and sing Christmas carols. Now the ACLU will drop legal paratroopers into any town allowing such a practice. It's really sad."

"I don't know much about Christmas carols, but I know enough about the ACLU to have my hair stand on end when I hear those four letters strung together. So now what? Are we done?"

"A little bit of tinsel now to fill in any bare spots." She pulled some silver and some colored strands of tinsel from her box and handed some to Jeremy. Within minutes they had hung them up, brightening the tree even more. "Now one last thing, the Christmas angel." She reached into her box and removed a plastic figure. She looked at it for a moment and then turned away from Jeremy.

When her shoulders started to convulse, Jeremy knew something was wrong. He walked around to the front so he could look in her eyes, which were now full of tears. "What's the matter, Princess?"

"Every year it was my job to put the angel on the tree. When I was still light enough for him to pick up, my dad would lift me up the top so I could perform my duty. This is our first Christmas without him." She started to sob. "I miss him so much!"

Jeremy, who could barely understand her words through the sobbing, pulled her into his arms and let her feel his strength as she poured out her liquid emotion. "Let it all out, Princess."



## Chapter 6

### Battle Lines are Being Drawn

Jeremy woke up early the next morning. His first thoughts were of Maria and the episode of crying that led to him holding her in his arms for fifteen minutes. *It was wonderful and sad at the same time. It seems that sometimes life just deals out a bum hand to people who deserve better. If I had any power to prevent it, she would never go through a trauma like she had with her father again. Unfortunately, I am powerless in Seattle.*

*What time is it? Oh, man. I'm an hour early. What am I going to do?* He was going to pick up the new book he wanted to read so badly, but he felt compelled to mount the saddle of his computer chair. It wasn't clear to him what it was he was looking for. *It's almost like an inaudible voice is telling me to use the computer. Am I losing it?*

*Might as well read my e-mail while I'm here.* He pointed his browser at Yahoo.com and was about to enter the mail page when a headline caught his attention. Some Christians were going to debate two atheists concerning the existence of God. Jeremy followed the link and ended up at ABC News. The link to the debate was available there, and Jeremy clicked on it. He recognized one of the participants as a TV star he had seen in reruns. He hadn't known the kid's real name, but now he was aware that Kirk Cameron was the name of the guy who played Mikey Seaver. Apparently, he had become a Christian during his TV stardom and was now involved in evangelism.

Jeremy watched the video as the debate unfolded. The topic of evolution and science played a major role in the conversation. *They're making some of the same points we did at our school board hearing. We were right on.* The debate wasn't marked by animosity, but there was a little hint of competition in the air. Kirk told the story of how he had converted from atheism to Christianity. Jeremy was totally impressed with his presentation. The other Christian participant didn't seem to be nearly as effective using his logical arguments. This was another testimony, as Maria referred to them, for him to note. Ironically, the atheists said that they had been Christians.

When the video was over, he glanced at some of the other

mini-movies that were available. There were a bunch of them on Christianity. It looked like he had found a gold mine for his research, but he didn't have time to begin mining, so he just staked out his claim. He copied the address for his current page into an e-mail and sent it to himself, Maria, and his dad. *Definitely, I'll be revisiting this page soon and finding out what the other videos contain. It would be cool if Maria and I can view them together.* His alarm clock went off reminding him that he was now on schedule and didn't have any more time left to dawdle. *Today is game day, tomorrow is a workday, and two days from now is Christmas Eve. It looks like another active weekend with lots of memories to be made.*

Jeremy walked out to his car just a little behind schedule. He still would be able to make it to school on time, so he wasn't worried. His hand groped in the dark to find his door handle. When his fingers closed on the cold metal, they detected something squishy, deposited on the handle. Jeremy pulled his hand up toward his nose. It wasn't necessary for him to get it very close because the odor almost gagged him from a foot away. *Crap!* He almost chuckled at his accidental use of Attila the pun, since the word that came out of his mouth matched what he had on his hands. One thing he didn't have on his hands was any extra time to make it to school before the final bell rang. Unfortunately, he couldn't go like this, and his car needed to be cleaned off also. The race was on. He formulated his plan as he hurried. Luckily the garden hose hadn't been put away for the winter, probably an oversight, but in this case procrastination had been his friend.

He hosed down the side of the Saturn as quickly as he could. Cautiously he examined the rest of the car to see if any more smelly substance had been applied to it. They had only targeted the driver's side. Next he turned the hose on his hand and got it cleared of solid material, so he felt clean enough to go into the house and wash it again, this time with soap and hot water. It was becoming painfully clear that he was going to be tardy. *Who in the world is after me and why? And how much nerve do they have coming right into my driveway to do this?*

Jeremy had the good sense not to share the story of his morning adventure with Maria at lunchtime. The news was kept secret until after science class. "Maria, you remember that note I had on my car last Friday?"

"The threatening one? The doo-doo voodoo note?"

"Yeah. Good way of looking at it. Well, the will-do turned into

a did-do with the doo-doo."

"You're kidding. On your car again?"

"Just on my door handle."

"When did that happen?"

"Sometime during the night while I was sleeping."

"Are you kidding? They went right up into your driveway to do it?"

"Unless the culprit is the most accurate thrower of doo-doo in the world, yeah."

"That takes some guts to do."

"That or a lack of brains."

"Do you think you could get fingerprints?"

"Hello! If the perpetrator didn't use gloves to rub the stuff on, he would have suffered the same fate, or worse, than he set me up for. Besides, I washed the car off. Can you imagine my reputation if I left my car sitting in the parking lot in that condition?"

"Good point. Your reputation can't afford any more slams. What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. What can I do? Get a Doberman pinscher for our driveway maybe? Sleep in my car? Hire a bodyguard for my auto and let *him* sleep in the car?"

"Maybe you could pray over it? Lay hands on it and ask for protection."

"You know, Maria, when I read the news about people dying all over the world in natural and manmade disasters every stinking day of the week, I get this impression that God has a few problems that are more serious to resolve than dispatching an angel to be the guardian of my auto."

"That's true. I feel guilty when I ask for little stuff from him. Forget I mentioned it."

*Yeah, how am I going to do that?* "I'm forgetting that I have to get my stuff and get on the bus. Team leaves in ten minutes. See you later, Princess."

"See you at the game. Good luck!"

\* \* \*

The Spartans lost a close game in Enumclaw. Jeremy played a good game and wasn't terribly upset they lost as the team rode home on the bus. Sports were still fun and he played his hardest, but winning had become much less important since Maria had entered his life. Such worldly triumphs were among the vapors of life that he had read about in the Bible. *Success in sports is*

*somewhat like a man's head – hair today, gone tomorrow.* He tried to focus on homework despite the noise around him as the bus wound its ways down the foothills of the Cascades.

Maria was waiting for the players' bus with some of her friends. When Jeremy saw her standing there waiting for him, a chill went down his spine. Thoughts of the last time she came to meet his bus flooded back to him, even though he only heard about it after the fact. *That wasn't a pretty situation, but it had worked out in the end, almost perfectly. My relationship with Dad is actually stronger now as a result of the conflict we went through.*

With a smile to rival that of the Cheshire cat, Jeremy walked over to Maria. "Are you hungry, Princess?"

"No fancy dinners like last weekend. I'd have to change your name from Einstein to Freddy the Freeloader because you'd be broke!"

"You're right. Jack in the Box works for me. We can stop and grab it to go, and then head over to your place and do some research. I found some cool stuff to show you on the Internet."

"You're in luck because Mom's home tonight. Let's go, but we need to be careful we don't spill any food on the computer. Mom wouldn't be a happy camper if we damaged her pet."

"No worries. We'll be watching a video, so we can start the action and then sit away from the screen and just watch. Like the little Dutch boy who got swept over the dike. Look, Ma, no Hans."

"That was pathetic. I hope you're not trying to start a craze of little Dutch boy jokes."

"The thought hadn't entered my mind. However, I was thinking about bringing back the elephant jokes. How do you make an elephant float?"

"Do I look like a zoologist?"

"Add one elephant, a couple of scoops of ice cream and the beverage of your choice."

"You know, Einstein, if you bring back elephant jokes, some wise guy is going to suggest bringing back the guillotine and giving you a shave with it."

"In reality, I never did like those elephant jokes."

\* \* \*

The couple arrived at Maria's house before their food cooled off. They set up chairs a few feet back of the monitor and Jeremy browsed to ABC news and started up the debate with Kirk

Cameron. He settled into the chair and enjoyed his Jumbo Jacks and the video. They finished eating shortly before the video ended.

"I used to have a crush on that guy," Maria said.

"Thanks for sharing *that* with me. By the way, he's way too old for you."

"Duh. Tell me you were never attracted to an older TV star in a rerun shown several years after the original."

"OK. I was never attracted to...well...maybe 'never' is too strong. There was Mary Ann on *Gilligan's Island*. And Audra Barkley from *Big Valley*. Oh, yeah, *I Dream of Jeannie*. And—"

"Enough, dude! Those women were much older than you are now at the time they shot the originals. You must like older women. I have to baby-sit tomorrow night, but my mom isn't doing anything so maybe you and her...."

"You're digressing from the subject at hand. There are some more videos to watch. Hey, they have comments posted from some of the viewers on this one. Let's read a few samples and see what's being said about this debate. Check this one out."

"A typical argument here," Maria said. "Atheists are simply making the point that there's no evidence for God. But Christians, or any other religious person for that matter, will probably not be persuaded by logical arguments because faith is outside the realm of logic.' What a crock! God created logic. The only logic outside of faith is faulty logic."

"Tell it like it is, Princess. Check this one out!" Jeremy read it out loud. "'Clearly, the New Testament speaks of a belief in Jesus Christ for forgiveness of sins and repentance many times over. It's never been and should never be about 'praying this prayer' and you'll go to heaven...It's about personalizing the gospel in one's heart.' Now there's a voice of reason."

"You really don't like that prayer, do you?"

"How can I say this without getting in hot water? Those are just words. If there's nothing behind the words, they're empty promises scattered by the four winds. I read something the other day about some guy who several years ago said that prayer and then asked if for sure he was saved. After being assured of his salvation, he went out and killed some people. His nickname was the 'Son of Sam'."

"Sounds like that guy needed help. You can't blame the killing on the prayer, Jeremy."

"I'm not. I'm just saying that the idea a person can get immunity from judgment by God just because he said this prayer

is just ludicrous to me. Let me see if I can find more."

He did some browsing and found several articles on the culprit, but nowhere did he find the story of the Christian salvation prayer prior to a murder. In total opposition he found reference to the fact that Berkowitz was involved in Satanic worship. "I don't understand it, I read that story somewhere."

"Jeremy, let me give you some of my wisdom, if you'll accept it. You can't believe everything you hear and read. When you're dealing with God and his people, you can bet that the enemy is going to spread lies of some type to counter God's word. Look! Check out this article. It says that this guy is now a Christian."

They read that article and another one, a conversion story by one of the guards at the prison where Berkowitz was incarcerated.

"I can't believe it. I thought I'd discovered an example of flakiness, but instead I find two more conversion stories and more evidence of Satan's work on Earth as well."

"One more recommendation, Jeremy, before I get off your case. When you investigate something, don't accept surface evidence. You've got to dig past the exterior to get to the truth. Evidence can be manufactured."

"I see your point, Maria. Circumstantial evidence isn't very reliable in the investigation of life, but it seems that even human witnesses are unreliable."

"Depends on what the witnesses are saying. Those people whose conversion stories we read are testifying of the effect that God had on their life. The Bible said they will overcome the devil by the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony. There are many men and women all over the world who have amazing stories of how they came to know and love Jesus, and how their lives were changed. I don't think any of these atheists pay any attention to this change. Some girl goes on TV and gets a new wardrobe, hair and makeup done by top pro's and people marvel at how she was made over into someone new. Those changes are temporary. God is making over lives every day. The effect on their lives should be construed as evidence when considering the number of people involved and the radical changes some people make."

"My story would be pretty boring up to this point. And yours is even more boring. You've been a Christian since you were a little girl, and you never reached a point where your life needed a radical change."

"I agree, and I'm not complaining one bit. I know that I won't be very effective in reaching those people who can't relate to

someone like me, but there are plenty of others who they can relate to."

"Here's another interesting video – on people speaking in tongues. Do you believe in that, Maria?"

"Oh, boy. I've never really been exposed to it. My churches didn't practice this so-called spiritual gift. I even heard some people claim that it was something from Satan."

"Did you apply the wisdom you just shared with me about getting below the surface?"

"I'm afraid I don't always practice what I preach. Sorry to pop your bubble."

"No bubble to pop, Princess. I recognized a long time ago that you haven't test-driven your faith very hard to see what it had."

"Let's watch the video, and let me see some evidence instead of me having to listen to your crowing."

Jeremy started the video. This story dealt with a doctor who set out to analyze the brain patterns of people speaking in tongues compared to their scan when they were praying in their native language. The results, as reported by him, showed that the front part of the brain that controls speech was almost inactive during the uttering of what sounded to Jeremy like Arabic. They showed some people really getting into it, almost to the point of turning Jeremy off. It seemed wrong when people lost their dignity and acted weird. *On the other hand, people go nutz at a sporting event, and that loss of dignity seems to be acceptable. We have a double standard, and I'm part of it.*

"Well, m'lady, what do you think?"

"Fascinating. Makes me think really hard. The Bible says woe unto them that call evil good and good evil. Even Christians have to worry about that. Can you imagine going around telling everyone that the speech of the Holy Spirit is of the devil and then finding out in Heaven that it really was a gift from God? I don't know how you prove it one way or another. Maybe it's possible that sometimes it's of God, and sometimes it's of Satan. Counterfeit gifts mimicking real ones, maybe? Does that make sense?"

"I guess the answer lies in the fruit. What's the fruit of this behavior? Is it wicked, or is it good? I think this is a topic worth investigating in depth, if you have the intestinal fortitude for the hunt."

Maria sang her response. "Anything you can search I can search better. I can search anything better than you."

"We'll see, Princess."

"Speaking of seeing, I want to see the video on the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. That's the one sin that Jesus says can't be forgiven. It says here that this couple, who I think are the same ones who did the debate tonight, are challenging people to commit the unpardonable sin and take the blasphemy challenge. Eight hundred individuals have done so already. This is unbelievable."

"Well, let's find out." Jeremy started the video.

The two watched in rapt silence as they listened to the man and woman explain how they were attacking religion and how their work would go on until Christianity ended. The guy was raised Catholic and became a born-again Christian at the age of thirteen. He said he loved Jesus and loved God, but they never spoke to him. When the video ended, Jeremy hit the stop button and looked at Maria. She was in shock.

"At the risk of being called redundant, this is unbelievable! I really don't know what else to say, Jeremy."

Jeremy got off the chair and paced up and down the carpet as he spoke with animation. "What torques me off is that they're advertising on teenage websites. And why do they think that Christians hate them because they're atheists? An atheist is just a person who doesn't know God yet. From my research, I see that lots of people who are accused of hatred were wearing the same atheistic shoes a short time ago. I just don't get it. If I tell somebody they're going to destroy their life with drugs or alcohol, does that mean I hate them? No! I tell them because I want the best for them. The Bible said we're supposed to love our enemies. Who else teaches that? That's the height of love. Yet these people put down the Bible that teaches us how to love by accusing it of spawning hatred. I see some hatred all right, but it's spewing right out of their own mouths."

Maria sat there staring at Jeremy with something which looked like fright to him. "You're getting a little wound up here, Jeremy."

"I know, but it bugs the snot out of me."

"You're not even a Christian yet. Why are you getting all hot and bothered?"

"I don't know, Maria. One thing is because blatant stupidity rubs me the wrong way. The 'voice of reason' the author calls it. He says he can disprove the existence of God with reason. And here I am, using my reason to find God. What he calls reason smacks of arrogant belligerence to me. It's anti-reason."

"Why do I get a distinct impression you'd like to slap him



silly?"

"Probably because I do feel like it, although, I think he's already silly enough without being slapped. I know that's not the Christian way to feel or think, but I feel the adrenaline shooting through my body right now – fight or flight, and I don't feel like fleeing. In fact, all of the crap I'm seeing is having the opposite effect on me. I see people being killed around the world because they want to follow Jesus. Then I see this type of rhetoric, and I understand the world is, indeed, a battlefield. This war seems to be heating up. But how do you fight a war when you're supposed to love the people you're fighting against?"

"Excellent question, Jeremy. I have a song that goes, 'Get on your knees and fight like a man. You'll pull down strongholds if you just believe you can. Your enemy will tuck his tail and flee. Get on your knees and fight like a man.' Do you understand what that means?"

"Are you talking about praying?"

"You got it. We battle not with flesh and blood but with principalities and rulers of darkness."

Jeremy sat down again. "Let me bring reason into this discussion. My emotions are starting to settle down, and my thinking is clearer now. There's nothing I can do physically to fight in this situation. You can't use force to make people change their minds. It's not right, and it won't stick. I might get some good vibrations from punching somebody out, at least for a season, but eventually my conscience is going to start nagging me. And this thing is way too big for me to fight in any conventional sense. It's like the proverbial squirt gun versus the forest fire."

"You're right. This problem is too big to fight on our own. I can see where they think they're hated because they received death threats. There is always the lunatic fringe that thinks that force is the way of the Lord and the answer to all problems. We saw that with the abortion clinic bombings and the threats against Judge Jones. Those are misguided individuals who misrepresent the gospel, but they send a clear message, apparently enough to override the love and compassion that the rest of the body of Christ feel for lost individuals like that. We need to feel sorry for those people who are in darkness, not threaten them."

"I remember in that *Jesus of Nazareth* movie, the most moving part was when Jesus was hanging on the cross and he forgave the Roman soldiers that had brutalized him. The feature of Christianity that marks it as different from any philosophy I've seen is this 'love your enemies' mentality. This isn't an easy way

to live."

"Exactly. Jesus said even the heathen love those who love them. It takes a special spirit to love those who hate you. Only with God's help can people do that."

"One thing that bothers me about prayer, Maria, is that I'm not sure how it works. For example, take this Brian guy. He was raised Catholic and then was a 'born-again' Christian, which indicates to me he said the prayer. I find it hard to believe that the people around him weren't praying for him as he walked away from God. Yet their prayers went unanswered, as it appears he did, which caused him to reject God in the first place. Despite their prayers, not only did he abandon his personal faith, he is fighting to help others do the same. So the prayers didn't seem to help."

"I know exactly what you mean. Prayer is a mystery, at least why some prayers are answered and some aren't. Why does God grant some requests and deny others? For example, in healing. There are lots of cases of people who were healed from cancer or some other physical ailment. The number of people who have died despite the prayers seems to be exponentially larger. Obviously, God doesn't answer all prayers, at least the way we want him to. I'm sure you realize how much we prayed for my father."

"My gosh, Maria. I forgot all about that. That must have put a big strain on your belief."

"One thing that helped is that I came to an understanding that prayer might not always solve a problem, but it always changes my heart. It keeps me from getting bitter about life. The big thing here is that we must trust God even when he doesn't answer our prayers. Our faith must not be in what he can do for us here on Earth, but what he has already done for us for our future."

"This is obviously the biggest stumbling block for atheists. I wonder how many of them are where they are because they prayed for something and didn't get it. Then they just gave up on God, figuring he didn't exist. That's exactly what happened with my dad."

"Prayer is probably something we should devote more study time to. In the meantime, I'd like to see that video about Teen Mania if you don't mind."

"Sure." Jeremy clicked on the links that started another video, one about an organization of teen missionaries and a movement called Battle Cry, which staged a huge rally in San Francisco. This one also kept their attention riveted on the screen.

"That was a lot more enjoyable to watch," Maria said. "It's

great to see teenagers standing up in public to lift up the name of Jesus and to denounce sexual impurity, drugs, and alcohol."

"It seems that their main theme is fighting a war. That might not go over well with people who perceive them as the opposition."

"Probably true. Want to find out more about this situation?"

"Why not?" Jeremy did a search on 'Battle Cry'. He found a site called *Source Watch* which contained an indictment of the Battle Cry movement. He read it out loud for maximum effect. "And, because Ron Luce leads youth to say in prayer, 'I'll keep my eyes on the battle, submitting to Your code even when I don't understand,' it would be foolish to expect that there's any part of the Bible's literal horrors this movement would be unwilling to enforce, including stoning disobedient children and non-virgin brides, executing gays, and keeping slaves."

"My gosh. They're afraid," Jeremy said. "They think that democracy is threatened by people who want to make a stand for Jesus. It's hard to believe that they could misinterpret the love that these kids have into ideas they would kill adults because of their sexual orientation and stone disobedient children. Where are they coming up with that stuff? I see a war being waged against sex and drugs, etcetera. Not against the people. Hate the sin, love the sinner is the command that I see in the Bible. The people involved in activities deemed sinful seem to take it personally when someone speaks out about the sin. This translates into 'you hate me' mentality, totally distorting and deflecting the message about the sin itself."

"Very insightful, Jeremy. You may have been late to the Christian scene, but you're making up for lost time in a hurry. And is that distortion an accident? Or is this just another arrow in the quiver of the author of evil?"

"Good question. Let's read another article." Jeremy chose the Wikipedia article and they scanned the screen.

"Holy cow," Maria said. "Evidence shows that if current evangelism trends prevail, only four percent of the youth of today will stand firm for Jesus by the time they become the decision makers of our nation. Jeremy, if only four percent of the population hold to Christianity, there will be nothing to stop the horror we discussed before. If the things going on today happen while a majority of people in the US claim to be Christian, I can't even imagine what it would be like with four percent. We'd be an insignificant minority."

"I'm new to this religious scene, but in the short time I've been

delving into the facts, I see a definite polarization taking place. When I first heard about the tribulation, right here in this house, I thought it sounded crazy. I'm starting to see that this doomsday scenario might not only be possible, but inevitable. This fight between good and evil that has been waged forever is coming to a head, and a showdown is on the horizon. You said that evolution was only the tip of the iceberg, and I see that you were right. I see a very bumpy ride ahead for the Christian bus."

"You might not want to be a passenger on that bus then."

"To tell you the truth, Maria, that scene from the Bible movie about Sodom and Gomorrah keeps coming back to me. It might be scary to be the target of persecution, but to become a part of a society where anything goes, except righteousness, scares me even more. Did you ever read the novel *Brave New World*?"

"Yeah."

"Well, it looks to me like that world is just around the corner unless God intervenes somehow. But I'm not going to avoid the fight if I believe in it. Just applying some common sense here, if we have to die, wouldn't it be better to die standing up for the one who can reward you for your efforts?"

"You may be right, Jeremy. But maybe God already has intervened. Maybe groups like Battle Cry are being raised up by the Lord for this purpose."

"So, tell me the truth, Maria. In watching those teens standing in unison together and lifting their battle cry, did it make you want to be there?"

"Good question. In a way, yes. In another way, no. I just went through one fight. I was hoping to have a little time off to charge up the batteries, but the bottom line is that I have to be ready when the Lord wants me. Really, I should be listening for his voice to tell me what role I need to play. Maybe I'm supposed to be part of another force. In the US we have an army, navy, marines, coast guard, and air force. They all have a common purpose, to defend our nation. But their strategy, training, and methods are different."

"That makes sense. Seems like Satan has several fronts in this war using different methods to accomplish his goals. God would employ multiple methods as well to keep pace."

"Bingo. Some people are called to stand up and let their political voice be heard. Others are called to serve the poor, some to just love people, and some to preach the gospel. So, let me ask the same question of you. Did you feel any pull to stand together with those youth as a team?"

"I found it very interesting, fascinating even, but I'm still in

discovery mode. Every day I learn of a whole new aspect of religion. I never saw people speak in tongues before tonight. There's no chance I'm going to leap before I look at all the different beliefs and attitudes and behaviors. I still am puzzled by this whole scene. The Bible says there's one Lord, one faith, and one baptism. Why, then, are there so many groups and so much infighting between groups?"

"Divide and conquer. Satan has been doing this trick for a long time. I think it's pretty obvious with the atheist pastor that the devil even has a foothold in churches."

"Are you kidding me? How can that be?" Jeremy asked.

"I don't know. For another shock, there are quote-unquote Christian churches that don't believe that Jesus was born of a virgin, and some that deny he rose from the dead and that he was the Son of God. How can they call themselves Christians under those circumstances? They might as well fold the tent, but that doesn't happen. Why? If they continue to identify themselves as Christians, they can be a cancer that eats away from the inside. The people like Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins that pose a frontal assault on God himself are much easier to deal with than those eroding the foundation from within."

"It almost sounds like you don't know who's your enemy and who's your ally?"

"In some cases, it's hard to tell. You know one of the things that I've studied since you got me into this research is an argument about the time of tribulation that we discussed during our evolution study."

"Yeah, I remember vividly our discussion about 666 and other things. Pretty scary."

"Well, there are apparently three different viewpoints of how the tribulation plays out for Christians. Some believe that all of the Christians will be raptured, or taken up to Heaven, before the problems start. Others believe that Christians will have to endure part of the trials before they're allowed to leave. And still others think Christians have to go through the whole period."

"Which one do you think is true?"

"I have no clue. What we believe doesn't change what's going to happen, Jeremy. It would be nice if we were spared all the stuff that's going to happen. Believe me, it doesn't sound pretty. There'll be lots of suffering. There's one nice thing about it though."

"What's that?"

"Can you imagine being among the last generations on Earth?"

Is it not awesome to think about being one of those who doesn't die but gets caught up into the clouds to be with Jesus?"

"I never thought about it before. That would be pretty cool, I guess. The prospect of death has just never appealed much to me. The item behind curtain number three sounds a lot better."

"Turns out there's a whole series of novels about the tribulation. The first one deals with the rapture, where the Christians just disappear off the Earth. One of my friends was telling me about that book. It's called *Left Behind*. I don't know if it's worth our time to be reading fiction when there's so much non-fiction material on the subject."

"Good question. Did they make it into a movie? That would take up less time, we could both do it at the same time, and it would provide a vacation from reading as well."

"I don't know. Let's Google!"

They went back to the computer and performed search on '+left behind+movie'. "Score!" Jeremy crowed.

"Holy cow. Look who was in the movie!"

"I saw, Maria. Same guy from the debate tonight. Kirk Cameron."

"Seems maybe we're supposed to see that flick."

"I'll stop by the video store and see if they have it for rental on my way home from work tomorrow night. We can watch Sunday afternoon, right?"

"Perfect!"

"I was wondering about those videos. It looks like they were part of *ABC Nightly News*," Jeremy said.

"You're right. That's what I saw anyway, in a series apparently called *Faith Matters*."

"What's their purpose?"

"Ultimately their purpose is to win the ratings game. There's cutthroat competition between the TV networks. It used to just be a fight between ABC, NBC, and CBS. Other challengers have risen up to take away market share. So when competition starts knocking you for a loop, you have to do things differently or do different things. This series appears to be a different thing."

"I imagine there's a pretty good following of Christians. However, if they feature things like this debate and blasphemy of the Holy Spirit, they're catering to the opponents as well. So this seems to be a masterful stroke designed to tap into the potential of this culture war."

"No doubt, Jeremy, and when other networks see that they're successful with it, no doubt they'll clone it. I just think it's great that

some of these stories are being told."

"But how much are they slanted to cast some negativity on religion? Did you see how Martin, whatever that guy's name was, seemed to be siding with the atheists? And they could be showing the speaking in tongues to make people think that the participants are crazy."

"They could. And you could start getting paranoid about everything too, you know."

"I know. Don't read too much into something."

"You know, Einstein, there's one more video there we didn't watch, about a pastor losing part of his flock. Shall we check it out?"

"Sure."

Jeremy started up the video. As before, the couple was intrigued by the contents of the presentation. Jeremy took advantage of the closeness of their two chairs to put his arm around Maria. She didn't pull away. The subject of this video was perhaps the most well-known pastor in the world, Rick Warren. His book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, sold thirty million copies. Another book, *The Purpose Driven Church* taught pastors how to grow their churches like he had done with Saddleback Church in California.

"Can you believe that, Jeremy? Thirty million copies of one book! If he made only a dollar a book, that would be a nice little fortune. By the way, that one is on the reading list I gave you."

"Cool. I was just going to ask if you'd ever heard of this guy. I certainly hadn't, but that doesn't mean anything since I'm still an ignoramus."

"You're learning quickly, Jeremy. One day at a time."

"Not fast enough for me though."

"So, correct me if I'm wrong here, this old guy says that he left his church because they started growing and bringing in a younger crowd and started singing contemporary music instead of the old traditional hymns."

"That's the way I understood it. I didn't know what a hymn is, but it seems to be an old-fashioned song or something?"

"Exactly, old and slow. Modern music with drums and a lively beat, etcetera, appeals to the younger generation. They've given a new meaning to 'a church on the rock'."

"So, the older folks don't like the rocky music, and they opt for the rocky road and take a hike?"

"That's what seems to be happening. I don't know where they go. I guess they find a church that plays the old music."

"Sounds kind of sad. Like being forced out of your home."

"Not really forced. Seems to me there should have been some kind of middle ground. I don't want to see kids miss out on the beautiful old hymns that are a part of the backbone of Christianity. On the other hand, it won't hurt the older generation to learn to identify with the younger generation. They should teach each other."

"Whatever the situation, Rick Warren doesn't seem to be the problem, though it sounded like they were trying to nail him. He was very impressive in answering those questions, don't you think?"

"I agree. Definitely, he is one of the guys we need to check out. His church in California would be the third largest city in South Dakota."

"Are you serious?"

"I certainly am. This mega church thing fascinates me. Why are huge churches mushrooming up all over the place? I'm not sure what the attraction is."

"Well, in that case, let's add that to the list of things we're going to investigate. I don't know if there's anything significant about that phenomenon, but it would be cool to find out."

"Speaking of 'out', I'd better be heading out. Midnight curfew has almost arrived, and I don't want my Saturn to turn into a pumpkin."

"You mean instead of a lemon?"

"Now don't get your Taurus confused with my Saturn, Princess. Is it true that thing runs on lemonade instead of gasoline?"

"Don't you be knocking my Taurus."

"I don't have to do that, since it already knocks all the time."

"Are you trying to jerk my chain?"

"What's the matter, Donna Rickles? Lost your touch? Lost your stomach for verbal jousting?"

"Careful, Einstein. You don't want to hear the roar of cannons again."

"Maybe I do."

"Are you kidding?"

"I miss some of our old conversations, when we were somewhat adversarial. Now that we have gone out, it seems that our little chats aren't as stimulating as they used to be."

"Oh, brother. And this after only a couple of weeks of dating. What's it going to be like, dude, after you get married, and you have the same old partner to discuss the same things day after



day."

"You have a point there. Somehow a marriage has to be kept fresh so it's new every morning, but yet the same – like a sunrise. I hope I never take you for granted, Maria."

"Ditto, Jeremy. Wait a second."

"For what?"

"For my brain to engage. I totally spaced out. Sunday is Christmas Eve. We'll be coming over to your house. Maybe we can all four watch the movie then?"

"Sure. Better yet, why don't you come early, and we'll watch it while it's still afternoon so we still have all night to do the other stuff. By the way, what's the other stuff? I've never had Christmas before."

"I guess it differs from family to family. Our routine was always basically the same. Christmas Eve at one grandparents' house and Christmas day with the other grandparents. We opened presents at both houses and always went to a candlelight service at church on Christmas Eve. Usually we read the Christmas Story from *Luke*. On Christmas day we had a big dinner, usually turkey. Most of us sang carols and sometimes drove around the town just checking out the Christmas lights. Sometimes a card game or a board game started up like spontaneous combustion, and other times we just sat around and talked."

"Sounds cozy."

"Is that a fancy word for boring?"

"Oh, no. I wouldn't say that. It's just kind of weird for me because I can't remember one single memory from a past Christmas. There's usually a college football game and some basketball on the tube. Other than that, I'm totally blank on the subject. It was just like a typical Sunday at our house. Sports, TV, naps, food, and books. So what are you guys doing Christmas day?"

"Nothing that I know of. 'Over the River and Through the Woods to Grandmother's House We Go' won't be playing on our jukebox this year since it's a 1500-mile trip to get there."

"Maybe you guys could hang with us again on Monday?"

"Are you sure you'll still want us after having us for several hours on Sunday?"

"I'm sure I will, but I don't know about your mom and my dad. I'm kind of curious to see how this rendezvous works out. Anyway, if they're cool with it, we could spend the whole Christmas together. It will make my first Christmas the most memorable one of my life."

"So far, you mean."

"I mean forever! Now, before I split, we need to tie up all the loose ends on the stuff we watched tonight. There are some brand-new tangents that I want to investigate, and I think we need to separate some wheat from the chaff. So keep all those things fresh in your mind until Sunday."

"I'll try to keep all those ideas percolating. Nice Biblical phrase, Jeremy, with the wheat."

"I thought you'd like that one. OK, I have to go." He held his hand out toward her. A puzzled look crossed her face, and then she extended her hand in his direction for a parting handshake. Jeremy lifted the hand and bent towards it at the same time and left a lingering kiss on the top. "There, Princess. I've been wanting to do that for a *long* time! Good night!"

"Sweet dreams, Einstein. By the way, I hope you don't shake hands with anybody else that way."

Jeremy laughed and started for his car. He turned back and saw Maria standing on her porch looking down at the top of her hand.

## Chapter 7

### His First Noel

When Jeremy got off work the next day, he stopped by the video store and found the *Left Behind* movie. He was all set for the next day as far as movies went. Unfortunately, he hadn't gotten a chance to buy Maria a Christmas present. *Hey, there are still four shopping hours until Christmas. No problem, man!* His dad was waiting for him when he arrived at the house.

"I'm going Christmas shopping. Want to come along, Jeremy?"

"Yeah. I need to buy a present for Maria. Suppose I should buy Lisa something too."

"Gee, I don't know, kiddo. This present exchanging thing is kind of touchy. If you buy her a gift, and she doesn't buy one for you, then she feels bad. If you don't buy her a gift, and she buys one for you, then you feel bad. It can be a real mess."

"I see that. Well, I don't want to make her feel bad, so I guess I won't get her one, and then I'll brace myself for feeling bad."

"Works for me. Let's go to the mall."

When they arrived at the mall, a small surprise was waiting for them. It was impossible to find a parking spot. A couple of times a car backed out up ahead of them, but another car took the vacant spot before they got there.

"Wow, do you think, Dad, maybe we shouldn't try this the night before Christmas Eve?"

"What was your first clue? Now what do we do?"

"Hey. There's a Christian bookstore just down the street. Let's check it out. Maybe they won't be so busy."

"They don't have quite so much to offer."

"No doubt, but you weren't planning on giving Lisa a chainsaw, riding lawnmower, or cell phone, so variety isn't that important. Quality over quantity."

They had no problem finding a parking spot near the bookstore. Jeremy had never been in a Christian bookstore before, but Maria had told him about them. He saw books everywhere he looked, but there were other things for purchase as well. Mr. Dillon spotted some wall pictures that drew his attention. Jeremy walked past the jewelry display and wandered

off into the music and movie section. *Maria already has a cross necklace.*

*My gosh. There are a zillion different CD's here. Are these all Christian artists?* It looked that way. Jeremy had no clue that Christian music was so big. He also had no clue what to buy for Maria. He didn't want to buy something she already had or that she didn't like. He drifted back toward his dad. In passing the jewelry counter again he saw a beautiful ring with a red stone, no doubt fake, with a little cross etched on it. The sale price indicated it was marked down from fifty-nine to thirty-five dollars. It was right in Jeremy's price range. His shopping was finished.

Jeremy wandered up the aisle where he had last seen his dad and found him trying to decide which picture to buy from among three. "Which one do you like, Jeremy?"

"Are you buying it for me?"

"No. For Lisa."

"Then why you asking me if I like it?"

"Because you're here, and I need a second opinion."

"OK. My second opinion is that Lisa's not here."

"Come on, wise guy. I really need some help here."

"You could use the scientific approach and flip a coin, but since there are three pictures to choose from, that would be a little inadequate."

"Wait. Not true. I'll just have two go up first and then the winner goes up against the third."

"Are you going to seed your little tournament so the best picture only has to win one flip?"

"Good point. I like that one the best, so this flip is between the other two." After flipping the coin twice, George Washington's opinion indicated he should buy the one he liked the best in the first place. They went to the counter and paid for their gifts.

"Would you like them gift-wrapped?" asked the sales clerk.

"My gosh, are you kidding? Have you ever seen a man wrap a present?"

The clerk laughed and quickly wrapped the selected items in beautiful Christmas wrapping paper.

"Well, that wasn't so hard, was it, Dad?"

"No thanks to you."

"What? I recommended the ceremonial coin toss, didn't I? Otherwise, you'd still be in there going 'eeny meeny miny moe'. So my shopping for my first Christmas is over."

"Did you get me something?"

Jeremy's mouth dropped wide open. *Crap! I never thought*

*about buying something for Dad. "How does a big hug work?"*

"Just fine. That'll be great. And I'll take back that new car I had hidden in the garage for you."

"That's a good joke, Dad, except you couldn't get a car in that garage to save your life. I've been tempted to hang a sign on the garage door. 'Sanford and Son, Junk Dealers'."

"Now you're cruising for a bruising when you refer to my collectables as junk."

"Forgive me, Dad. I had totally forgotten they're collector's items. Right now, they're all collecting dust and cobwebs. Speaking of dust, there's a book that's been collecting dust for the last couple of days that I'm eager to start reading. Let's go home."

\* \* \*

Jeremy woke the next morning earlier than he needed for church and continued reading his book, *I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be An Atheist. This is really good stuff. A self-defeating argument. There is no absolute truth. Well, that means your statement about truth is not truth either and thus defeats itself. I love it. Maria will have to read this book before we go to college.*

Reluctantly, he put the book aside and prepared for the service. He had delayed to the point where he had to hurry. With a purposeful stride the lanky teenager covered the distance from the house to his car. Within ten seconds he was on his way down the street. Six blocks from the house, he looked in the rear-view mirror and saw a policeman behind him with his lights flashing. His first glance went down to the speedometer. *Whew, I'm going exactly the twenty-five mph allowed by law.* Jeremy pulled over so the police car could go by. Much to his chagrin, the policeman also pulled over. Jeremy watched him approach the driver's side of the Saturn and rolled down his window.

"Good morning, officer."

"Son, I'm sorry, but you can't be driving like that!"

"Like what? I wasn't speeding."

"No, you weren't. But, you can't drive without taillights."

"What? Did they both burn out?"

"I couldn't tell you. It doesn't matter if they're burned out or not. They're not going to shine through those coverings."

"What? What do you mean...coverings?"

"You didn't have your lights covered over for some reason?"

"No. There was nothing on them last night when I went to bed. Can I get out and look?"

"Be my guest."

The officer and Jeremy walked to the back of the Saturn. There, duct taped on, were two large sections of a black plastic garbage bag. There was also an odor emanating from under the bags that was very familiar to Jeremy.

"Crap! They got me again!"

"Who got you again?"

"I don't know. First it was eggs on the windshield, then eggs on the door handles, then doo-doo on the door handles and now this."

"Did you report the other incidents to the police?"

"From what I read in the newspapers, you guys don't have time to worry about petty stuff like this."

"It wouldn't be so petty if you caused a car accident because the guy behind you didn't know you were turning or stopping."

"That's true. Great! I'm going to be late for church."

"Which one?"

"Calvary Community."

"I'm headed over there now to direct traffic. I can give you a lift, and you can deal with your car later. It appears that in order to make your car drivable, you're going to get your hands a little...dirty."

"Thanks, I'll take you up on that offer." The two got in the squad car and proceeded to the church.

"What's your name, son?"

"Jeremy. Jeremy Dillon."

"The basketball player?"

"I don't know if I'm *the* basketball player, but I am a player on the Sumner High team."

"I thought you looked familiar. That was a great shot you made the other night against Auburn."

"Thanks."

The two talked about sports until Jeremy exited the squad car in front of the church. A shuttle bus drove by just as he got out, and he looked up to see if anybody saw him get out of the police car. He could hear the rustle of the wings of flying rumors. Only one face stared out at him as the lumbering vehicle went by and let out a smoke bomb. It was Maria.

She was standing outside the chapel when he strolled into the lobby. There were only a couple of minutes until the service started. "So, Einstein, dare I ask what you were doing in a police car? Don't tell me you've started moonlighting to earn a little extra Christmas cash?"

"It's kind of a long story, Maria. I'll tell you on the way to our seats." He filled her in on the dirty details, and they settled into their chairs just as the music started, causing them to stand up again.

After the service, Jeremy rode the bus back to the Masterson vehicle, and Lisa drove him back to where he left the poop-mobile.

"Do you want us to stay and help?" asked Maria.

"No sense you ladies going through this ordeal. I got smart and put some gloves in my car after the first episode, so I should be fine. Once I get the plastic off, I can drive it home and wash it down. We'll both be cleaned up and good as new by the time you guys come over this afternoon."

"OK. Maybe you should buy a super duper pooper scooper?"

Jeremy rolled his eyes and flashed just a little fire out of them.

"That would be our cue to exit, Mom. Merry Christmas, Preppie!" They drove away and left him to his machine latrine duty.

*Red Green, the duct tape comedian, would be proud of the tape job on this little prank. I'd like to use some of this duct tape to strap some people to a tree.* He removed the tape and plastic, exposing the source of the smell. Luckily he had a garbage bag to dispose of the remnants of the other bags. The lights weren't totally covered by goo, so Jeremy figured enough light would make it through so he could safely navigate the six blocks back to his house. He drove slowly just in case. *Merry Christmas! I wonder what Christmas presents I could dole out to the turkeys who performed this dirty deed.*

\* \* \*

Lisa and Maria arrived at three p.m., and Jeremy ushered them into the living room. He had the movie all set up for a quick takeoff. Bowls of popcorn and cups of apple cider awaited the start of the flick. Jeremy's dad came in from the kitchen as the threesome were settling in on the couch.

"Hi, Lisa and Maria. Welcome to our humble abode and Merry Christmas."

There was, perhaps, enough room for four people on the couch if they sat touching one another. Jeremy wouldn't have minded that arrangement. He watched curiously to see what his dad was going to do. It was obvious he thought about the couch, but he finally opted for the safe alternative of the easy chair near Jeremy's end of the couch. With a flick of his finger, Jeremy

started the movie.

A fascinating story unraveled as the hero, an airplane pilot, gets the shock of a lifetime. His wife and son have disappeared off the face of the Earth. Many other people all over the world have vanished also. His wife told him of the possibility of this occurrence when she tried to convert him to her Christian religion, but he hadn't wanted to listen. Now he had to deal with the reality that the rapture had actually occurred. The rest of the movie was about his efforts to find his own faith and to fight for survival in the world that was also left behind.

When the movie reached the end, Jeremy shut it off and said, "Open discussion now on the content. What did we learn from this, and of what value is it?"

Nobody spoke up. The silence was somewhat embarrassing. There seemed to be some tension and nervousness in the room. Jeremy needed to think of something to break the ice. "Oh, come on. If you guys don't liven up, I'm going upstairs and put on my undertakers suit."

"You don't have...I mean...you don't want to suffer through that so I suggest we relax and not be so self-conscious," Paul said.

Maria joined in the ice-breaking party. "I guess the part that spoke to me the most was the daughter since I can relate the best to her. It was interesting that, even though they had missed the rapture, romance and love were still a part of the equation of life here on Earth. It was strange watching Kirk Cameron play the role of the serious newspaperman. I'm so used to watching him wisecrack on *Growing Pains* that I just couldn't enjoy his part the way I should have."

"That's funny. I thought the same thing," Lisa said. "I'm so used to seeing him as a kid that I guess I just wouldn't let him grow up. The most interesting part for me was the relationship between the pilot and the woman he was messing around with when the rapture occurred. I kept waiting for her to get her act together and have them become a couple."

Jeremy's dad got up and refreshed the apple cider cups. "I found it was extremely fascinating to pretend that this really did happen, and I was among the people out there trying to find answers. You know, if a large segment of the population, all of them professing Christians, went bye-bye all of sudden, many people would be aware of the fact that this event had been prophesied in the Bible. So how could they not turn to God in that situation? That elusive proof that we were never really permitted



to see on Earth would be right in front of our faces. It would show us that Jesus was truly who he said he was and was doing exactly what he said he would do. The evidence would be overwhelming, but still people would rationalize it away, just like they have done with evolution."

"I couldn't help but wonder how many people have been tempted to take the plunge and commit themselves to the Lord but have fought off the urge," Lisa said. "How many of them would take advantage of this second chance, and how many would still hold back?"

Jeremy couldn't help but think of himself. He had been poised to pull the trigger a couple of times, but just couldn't bring himself to relinquish control.

The discussion became animated and continued for about an hour until Paul crashed the party. "I would like us all to reconvene in the dining room to partake of the feast I've been slaving over all day." They all got up and made their way to the dining room table.

Jeremy felt satisfaction over the way things were going, so far. This had definitely not been a Christmas movie, but it had been a real eye-opener for him, and it seemed everyone else was touched by it as well. Once they got started, the discussion had been wonderful.

The time passed quickly, and soon it was time to leave for the candlelight service. Jeremy didn't leave any doubts about the seating arrangements for the car ride over to chapel. He grabbed Maria and pulled her into the back seat with him. Lisa had no option but to sit up front with Paul. Lisa had to open her own car door, much to Jeremy's chagrin.

*I have to give Dad lessons on how to deal with women, and I've only been dating for a month. He's really out of practice. Or maybe he was never in practice. Maybe Mom carried the relationship. Or maybe Dad just forgot because he was worrying about other things – like stepping into a church for the first time in eighteen years.*

At the doorway to the sanctuary, ushers handed each person an unlit candle. Jeremy was curious to see what they were going to do with them. After some Christmas songs and a brief message about the reason for the season, the candle-lighting part of the ceremony arrived. The pastor instructed the ushers to light their candles from his. They, in turn, lit the candle of every person sitting on the aisle, and then each person shared with his or her neighbor. The lights had been turned off so the only illumination in the room was coming from the flickering candles. Jeremy looked

all around in amazement at how much light emanated from that little stick of wax when it was multiplied by seven hundred. He remembered a passage in the Bible that his mother had highlighted. That passage talked about a light on a hill. It said something about not putting the light under a bushel but letting it shine in the darkness, so that all men could see. They sang *Silent Night* as the candles blazed throughout the sanctuary. When the final strains of the song died away, the pastor asked everyone to extinguish their candle. The lights came back on and the magic of the moment passed. *Looking into Maria's eyes, lit only by candlelight, was an awesome moment. I feel something special, but I can't really describe it.* A note from the piano gave him an idea. *That's it. I'm in tune. I feel like I'm in tune right now with the universe.*

\* \* \*

On the way home, Jeremy glanced up in the front seat at Lisa and contemplated that a year ago tonight, she had spent her last Christmas with her high school sweetheart as he fought demon cancer. No doubt there were some memories going on there which prevented her from enjoying this moment as much as Jeremy was. The same was true for Maria.

"We have a couple of presents for you to open and some dessert if you're interested," Paul said when they reached home.

"We have some presents for you, too. Maria, would you get them out of the car?"

"Sure, Mom!" Jeremy went with her as Lisa and Paul walked up to the door together.

"This was really a wonderful night, Paul. I'm afraid I have to apologize for not being full of Christmas cheer. I'm afraid the ghost of Christmas past is being a wet blanket. I just can't get used to the fact that Lance can't be here to light my candle and hand out the presents and...."

"Don't worry about me. You don't have to apologize. I know that grief has to run its course. You'll probably never totally get over the loss. I know I haven't yet, and it's been eighteen years for me."

They went into the house and continued the discussion about their deceased spouses.

Maria and Jeremy took their time getting the presents, so their parents could be alone for a while.

"So are you guys coming over again tomorrow?"

"I don't think so, Jeremy. Did you see my mom's face? I'm afraid she isn't able to enjoy the festivities. Unless I miss my guess, she'll want to stay home tomorrow. We'll probably watch *It's A Wonderful Life* again, the one common thread with our past Christmas holidays that we have here away from home."

"And you probably wouldn't want to come over by yourself?"

Maria shook her head. "I couldn't leave her alone on Christmas, even to be with you."

"That's cool. Well, I guess the good news is that I can spend lots of time reading my book tomorrow. Maybe I'll even finish it!"

"Speaking of finishing, we better get these gifts into the house and finish up this party in style."

The gift opening didn't take long since each person had only one gift to open. Maria was first. "Oh, Jeremy, it's beautiful. I love rubies! Thank you so much!"

*Sounds like the brownie point Geiger counter is going off. Now I have to pretend to like her gift even if I don't, so I don't bruise her feelings. It looks like a pair of shoes.* He tore the paper off and found a shoebox containing two musical CD's. One was a Christian CD by a band called Petra. The second was Christmas songs by the Carpenters. "Cool. I can listen to Christmas with Karen tomorrow while I read. Thanks!"

The little card on the present for Paul indicated it was from Lisa and Maria. It was a Bible. *Now Dad won't have an excuse not to read some scripture.*

Lisa let out a little gasp when she opened her present. "This is a Thomas Kincade! I love Kincade, the painter of light, and so does Maria. Thank you so much!" Jeremy had a smug look on his face. *The father of his country did know best. Way to go George Washington!*

## Chapter 8

### A Blue Christmas Without You

Jeremy was settled on the couch with the book he was so desirous to read when the phone rang the following morning. He turned down the volume on the Carpenters Christmas album he had been enjoying while he read.

*Don't tell me the telemarketers are working Christmas day.*  
"Hello."

"Hey, Einstein. Thanks again for the great time last night. I have some good news and some bad news."

"I hate it when people start out a conversation that way. Let me have it."

"First the bad news. My SST organization, Scientists Seeking Truth, is not going to happen."

"Bummer! How come?"

"Because the good news is that someone has already created an organization that does pretty much everything that I wanted in mine, and they're already established. I ran across their website when I was surfing. The organization is called IDEA, Intelligent Design and Evolution Awareness. The website is [www.ideacenter.org](http://www.ideacenter.org). They have student clubs, and they also have adult clubs. Since they already have the website and the infrastructure, I don't have to do any of that, but I can be the leader of my own local club. I signed up, and they're supposed to send me some materials on what I need to do. So, when I go away to college I can start a new club there. After graduation from college, I could start an adult club wherever I land. Is that great or what?"

"Awesome! We really didn't have time to do all that stuff with our current research, so this is really good news. Sounds like this might be a little different from yours though. They might only allow discussion of intelligent design and not allow the freedom to just follow the facts."

"Maybe. I hope that's not the case, but we'll see. By the way, the guy I communicated with is also on the staff at the Discovery Institute."

"Cool."

"How's your reading going?"

"Great. This is a wonderful book. Too bad we didn't read this one before the school board hearing, not that we needed any more evidence, but this one has some great stuff in it. So far it's been mostly about philosophy and the universe. Astronomers are basically stuck with the fact that the universe had a beginning and anything that has a start has to have a cause. Things look pretty good in that area for the design argument. One guy made a joke that some day the ACLU is going to sue NASA for providing so much religious material."

"I love that."

"Another thing that we touched on in our arguments was the anthropic principle."

"That term isn't familiar to me."

"Me neither, until now. Ronnie testified about the factors of the universe regarding the level of gravity, oxygen, etcetera. This theory basically says the universe is finely tuned for existence of life. We talked about the concept, but just didn't know the name for it."

"Gotcha. Well, I better get back to Mom and let you get back to your book. I just wanted to let you know the good news and wish you a Merry Christmas Day."

"Thank you. The same to you."

"God bless you, Jeremy."

"He is. Merry Christmas. Bye."

*I really am blessed. The only things I need are some answers, and I'm going to get those one way or another.*

Jeremy had just opened up his book again when his dad, carrying some boxes, popped into the room. Every year during the winter break he bought Jeremy something new in lieu of the Christmas presents other kids received. This year things were different. Whatever gifts Dad was bearing were wrapped up in Christmas paper, very clumsily. *Lucky thing they wrapped gifts at the bookstore. Maria and Lisa would probably still be laughing otherwise.*

Paul put the boxes under the Christmas tree. "Well, should we open them up or leave them there overnight and hope they breed?"

"What would you do with baby boxes?"

"Forget it. Let's open them."

"Wait. I didn't buy you anything. Why does one package say it's from me?"

"In a way it is from you. You gave me the idea to do this, and your coming home again gave me the inspiration for it. So here."

He tossed one box to his son and picked up the other one for himself.

Jeremy opened his first. *Unbelievable! Dad bought me a cell phone! More likely he got the phone free and bought me a subscription for phone service. Hope he's paying the bill!*

Mr. Dillon opened up his box and revealed a cell phone exactly like Jeremy's, except his was blue instead of red. "I got a special family plan so you can call me any time without using up your minutes. You have 300 minutes a month during prime time and free weekend minutes. So don't be using the phone to conduct any love affairs, unless you confine yourself to weekends. I'm paying the base bill. Anything over 300 minutes, you'll be paying at a tune of ten cents a minute. Are you tracking with me?"

"Perfectly. Thanks, Dad. This is a great gift, for both of us. You never know when one of these can come in really handy."

"Like when your neighborhood gets closed down by a flood?"

"Yeah. That one incident should have been enough to teach you the value of a mobile communication device."

"I don't know about that, but it showed me the value of a cell phone."

"That joke isn't even registering on the one to five scale."

"Went off the charts, huh? Six or seven maybe?"

"Wrong end of the scale. This is great. I can call Maria now, and she might not know it's me calling, at least the first time. Does a holiday count as a weekend?"

"I believe it does."

"Cool. I'll catch her later. I have to think up a good prank for Miss Angel Golightly of the mortgage company."

"What? I thought you were talking about Maria?"

"Forget it, Dad. It's a long story. I gotta get back to my book."

"Speaking of books, I wanted to use my new Bible. I'm going to bring back your mother's tradition of reading the Christmas Story out loud. Do you want to get your Bible so you can read along?"

"No thanks. I'll just listen."

Paul opened to chapter two of the *Gospel of Luke* and began to read.

As his dad read, Jeremy saw a picture of himself and Maria traveling to Bethlehem on a donkey. *What would that have been like for a young man and woman to go through? Mary was the mother of Jesus and wife of Joseph. Maria is the Spanish and Italian equivalent of Mary.* "It's really mind-blowing to think of a little baby being the king of kings."

\* \* \*

Despite his best efforts, Jeremy could not come up with a telephone prank to pull on Maria that met his satisfaction. *I'll just work on it during the week and try next weekend. This has got to be one she'll remember for a long time.*

Jeremy had to go to sleep that night without finishing his book, thus failing short in his goal. The book contained over 400 pages, and this wasn't the easiest reading material he had ever encountered. *I'll finish this one up fairly early tomorrow, and then I'll dig into Lee Strobel's work. Oh, crap. I forgot. I have a dentist appointment tomorrow morning. I'll take the book with me so I don't waste any time.*

\* \* \*

Jeremy sat in the lobby of the dentist's office the next day attempting to get as close to the finish as he could before he was summoned to the electric chair.

"What's your book about?"

Jeremy looked up. There was only one other person in the lobby, and he was staring straight at Jeremy. He appeared to be from India. "Excuse me?"

"That's an interesting title. What's the book about?"

*About 400 pages.* "Religion and science and atheism and evolution."

"What do they say about those topics?"

*Jeez, Mister. How am I supposed to summarize 400 pages of technical writing in a nutshell?* "To sum it up quickly, it says that evolutionists are kind of like a one-legged man in a butt-kicking contest."

"What?"

"In other words: they don't have a leg to stand on."

"Oh. I get it. That's an interesting perspective. By the way, my name is Dr. Krishna."

"Doctor? Are you a dentist?"

"No, I'm an MD."

"I never ran into an MD at a dentist's office before."

"Doctors have teeth too, you know."

"I never thought about that before. Dentists go to the doctor too, huh?"

"Yeah, funny how that works. So what do you think of

evolution?"

"You really want to know?"

"That's why I asked the question."

"First of all, let me define evolution as the theory that man evolved from lower life forms. We need to be on the same page before I start. If you're an MD, you understand the circulatory system, I assume. How do you explain that a one-celled creature could develop a heart, a magnificent machine in its own right, blood, clotting capability, 60,000 miles of blood vessels to deliver the blood to all the locations it needs to go, and the connections to the lungs, eliminatory system and cells? How can this happen via gradual mutations?"

"At the time of conception the egg is one cell, and it gives rise to the entire human body. That's how an organism went from one cell to a complex living thing like a human. DNA."

"You're right about human conception. That one cell contains a computer program and all the data it needs in the DNA to reproduce a replica of the parent. We know that's how all the organs, etcetera, of the body are developed. But where did DNA come from, and how did it get the ability to produce an organism? But how did DNA develop via mutations, when by definition mutations are caused by changes in the DNA? Where did all the information come from to create that body? Is information matter or energy – or is it an independent entity?"

"What do you mean?"

"For example, look at a page in that magazine you're holding. See the words. They are formed by putting black ink, which is matter, on the piece of paper, which is also matter with the use of some type of energy. My book is the same. Yet despite the fact they're the same, they could be diametrically opposite in content. For the power of the words isn't in the matter involved but rather in the meaning derived from the combination of words used. The idea or information and the matter used to transport the idea are not the same thing. The idea has a life of its own."

"Interesting concept."

"Also DNA is the protein factory, yet DNA is comprised of protein. Where did the protein to create DNA come from if only DNA creates protein? Another version of the chicken versus the egg."

"I don't have an answer for that. You seem to be very knowledgeable on this subject."

"I should be. I lived and breathed it for several months."

"I want to believe in God, but it just seems that evolution has



all the answers for me."

Jeremy tore a piece of his bookmark off and grabbed a pen. He wrote down the name of three books, *What Darwin Didn't Know* by Geoffrey Simmons, *Darwin on Trial* by Phillip Johnson, and *Darwin's Black Box* by Michael Behe. He added his phone number at the bottom and handed it to the doctor. "Here, Doc. This is a prescription for you. Take these three books every night before bed, and call me in the morning, after you finish them. Then tell me if you still think evolution has all the answers."

"Jeremy Dillon," called out the dental hygienist.

"I gotta go, Doc. It was nice chatting with you. Give me a call if you have any questions."

"Thank you."

As Jeremy was about to disappear into the bowels of the dental office, he looked back at the doctor and saw him studying the piece of paper. *I wonder if the doctor will take his medicine. If he does, how will he respond to the therapy?*

Shortly after he returned home from the dentist office, Jeremy finished his latest book. *Another conquest made*. He walked it over to his bookshelf and put it down. He surveyed the new pile of books he had received in the mail. After that long and tedious read, he felt like studying something that wouldn't take as long. He grabbed *The Case for Christmas* by Lee Strobel, which contained fewer than a hundred small pages. *I'll finish this in an hour or so. I should have read this one before Christmas, but better late than never*. He looked over at the rest of the books. *The Case for Easter* was also short. *I'll read that one today, too. I'll still have time left to start another one*. *The Case for Faith* grabbed his attention, and he added that to his stack. He took his three books back to bed, lay down, and commenced on his newest literary journey.

When he finished the first one, he looked up at the clock and saw his stomach was right on in announcing that it was lunchtime. He took the second book with him and descended to the kitchen to have some turkey sandwiches while he read. He had to scrape mayonnaise off his book more than once. *What I need to do is invent a book holder that obeys oral commands to turn the pages. I could read at the table without all the hassle of trying to turn the page with one hand and putting the book down so I can do something with both hands. Maybe I could make my fortune on that little idea. I could hook it up to exercise machines so the person could read handsfree while working-out*.

Shortly after lunch, Jeremy closed book number two and

mentally marked another mountain climbed. He looked at the third book. *Since I've already finished three books today, maybe I should take some time to sharpen the figurative saw of my mind. No better way to do that than to discuss the books with Maria.* He dialed her phone number.

"Hey Einstein. Do you miss me?"

"That's a dumb question. Does Scobby Doo miss Scobby snacks?"

"Is that supposed to be a compliment? Are you comparing me to dog food?"

"Not exactly my intent, Princess. Just an example, maybe a bad one. How about, does a sunflower miss the sun?"

"I like that one a whole lot better. So, what's up?"

"I finished three books today so far. And I gave some testimony for intelligent design to a doctor."

"Wow. Full day for the big guy."

"Not full enough, so I wanted to discuss these books with you to get the maximum bang for the buck. Nothing like a good discussion to cement an idea into the head."

"I hope you're using lightweight cement. Otherwise I'll have to change the words to the song *He Ain't Heavy, He's My Brother* when I think of you."

"You think of me?"

"Once or twice a day."

"Go figure."

"Go figure what?"

"What I meant was, I probably only think of you maybe...once or twice a minute, and you think of me once or twice a day. It's clear this relationship is a little one-sided and maybe lopsided."

"And maybe I lied."

"Oh, you don't think about me at all?"

"That's not what I said. A girl has to keep some secrets, you know."

"Why?"

"It's an unwritten law, I think. Women have to keep a certain mystique about them so men don't take them for granted."

"I thought men needed to do that. Maybe it's better to dispense with the mystique and just get vulnerable. Maybe the only way to a genuine relationship is by being totally transparent."

"Wow. You have time to read all those books and think about me and come up with your own philosophical ideas of romance, too? You're a marvelous work and a wonder."

"Was there ever any doubt in your mind?"

"Let me think about that one, and I'll get back to you," Maria said.

"Don't wear yourself out looking. By the way, there's a special New Year's Eve service at the church at eleven p.m. Do you want to ring in 2007 with yours truly in a rocking service?"

"Aren't you the lucky one? I have to baby-sit that night, but I'll be done at ten p.m. Will you pick me up?"

"If there's no danger of throwing my back out of place."

"Does that class clown gene of yours ever take a day off?"

"What, and ruin my reputation?"

"I see your point, Alfalfa."

"I wondered if you'd ever call me by that name someday. That's funny."

"So, let's talk about your books. That's the reason you called, right?"

"Yeah, sure. This Strobel guy is pretty interesting. He's like a namedropper. When he wants to do research on something, instead of opening a book or browsing on the Internet like I do, he jumps into an airplane and flies to visit some expert and interviews him. He captures the entire session on a tape recorder and then writes up the experience later. The individuals he visits seem to be pretty high-profile people. That would be cool to just pick up the phone and say I want to interview you and pick your brain about yada yada, and be able to pull it off."

"So what kinds of questions does he ask in the interviews?"

"Very probing inquiries. He plays the devil's advocate and really keeps his target's feet to the fire. He has that perfect dose of skepticism that allows him to ask all the relevant questions, but the good sense to accept answers that have the weight of the evidence behind them. Some of the things he explores in his Christmas book are the existence of Nazareth, the Christmas star, and the prophecies concerning the birth of a Messiah."

"What do you mean evidence on the existence of Nazareth? Are you saying someone questioned whether that city really existed?"

"Exactly. Apparently it wasn't mentioned by any historians or in the Old Testament. Some archaeologists recently found some historical record that showed that some guys had been transferred to a small village called Nazareth."

"Interesting."

"He also told this amazing story of a guy named Louis Lapides. This guy was born Jewish and was told the New Testament was a how-to manual on killing Jews. He wasn't a

practicing Jew. The dude was on drugs and partying in the desert when he prayed to God to reveal Jesus as the Messiah to him, and he claims he did. He asked for help in changing his life. Today he is the pastor of a Jewish Christian church in California named Beth Ariel Fellowship."

"Cool. I love that kind of story."

"Yeah, that was an encouraging story. Sure beats the sad tale of John Loftus and his debunking squad."

"So what else did you read about?"

"The book about Easter was fascinating. Strobel interviewed some medical guy who is an expert on forensic pathology – the study of corpses in murders. That was pretty morbid, but he explained how Jesus couldn't possibly have survived his ordeal on the cross."

"Why would he need to explain that?"

"Because some people claimed that Jesus only fainted on the cross, and that's why he was seen alive after the crucifixion."

"That's insane."

"Maybe, but you know how skeptics grasp at all the straws they can drum up. Anyway, Strobel established that Jesus was dead. Then he tried to establish the fact the tomb of Jesus was really empty so he interviewed a brilliant guy named William Lane Craig, who talked about the historical evidence of the missing body."

"Didn't some people claim that the disciples stole the body and then made up the story about the resurrection?"

"Correctamundo. One piece of that story flies in the face of logic though. Who makes up a story about a guy coming back to life and then goes out and suffers a harsh life and a cruel death as a result of trying to convince others that the story is true?"

"I'm with you, Jeremy. Nobody in their right mind."

"The last part of the book deals with the sighting of Jesus after his death. Strobel talked to one guy who debated the resurrection with Anthony Flew, a leading atheist at the time, who apparently has had some type of change in his beliefs since then. Anyway, in the debate, Flew received zero votes from the five judges and one judge rated the debate a tie. One of the judges wrote, 'I conclude that the historical evidence, though flawed, is strong enough to lead reasonable minds to conclude that Christ did indeed rise from the dead.'"

"So what does Jeremy's reasonable mind tell him?"

"It's becoming clear to me that the most powerful evidence for Jesus being the Son of God might be the willingness of his

disciples to give up their lives and to devote them to spreading the good news around the world. The courage of the people in Rome to face the lions instead of renouncing Jesus is also powerful testimony, and they never even had the privilege of walking with Jesus. By the way, did you know every one of the original disciples was put to death except John?"

Maria held up a finger. "And Judas, who killed himself."

"Right. And Paul, who wasn't one of the original apostles, also gave his life. And who knows how many others suffered the same fate?"

"I think some guy wrote a book about the martyrs. Maybe that has a list of many of them. I'm sure that lots of people have given up their lives for their Christian faith anonymously. God knows who they are, and they'll be rewarded accordingly."

"By the way, I'm doing a search right now to see if I can find the book you're talking about on the Internet. This persecution factor is another thing I find interesting. How many people of other religions are being put to death for their beliefs?"

"I don't know, Jeremy. What goes on in China is beyond my knowledge, but I know they frown on all religion. Whether people die rather than give up Islam or another faith, I'm not sure. It seems that Christians receive the most persecution, but maybe I'm biased."

"That's the way I see it too. I've been running that question over and over in my head. Why is that happening? Is this evidence that Christians really are God's people, and the devil is using his influence to eradicate them?"

"I've done some study of the Jewish people. They were God's chosen nation, and it seems they have been persecuted forever. We all know about the Holocaust, but before that the Jews always seemed to have been persecuted. Why was that? It wasn't totally religion based because a Jew by birth isn't necessarily a religious Jew. That makes it a bit confusing."

"You've convinced me. It seems you have a heart for the Jewish people."

"Read some Leon Uris books like *Exodus*, and you'll probably develop the same."

"I think I found your book of martyrs. Is it by a guy named Foxe?" Jeremy asked.

"That sounds right, Jeremy. *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, I think?"

"That's it. They have a list of the early martyrs here, including the disciples. Holy cow! Five of those guys were also crucified. Three of them were beheaded. A few were beaten or stoned to

death. A couple were killed with spears, and one was hanged. John was boiled in oil and survived it, finally dying of old age around the year 110 AD. I wonder if he hit the 120-year barrier."

"That's pretty mind-boggling."

"One salesman out of the whole bunch survived his sales pitch. Yet the organization that they represented and the faith they tried to sell has changed world history and still is changing it. Unbelievable!"

"There was one old guy from the Jewish governing body that said they shouldn't do anything to the Christians. He said if the movement was of God, they'd be in deep doo-doo. That of course is a paraphrasing of what he really said. And if the movement wasn't of God, it would die by itself. It appears that it survived."

"And prospered."

"There's one thing here that causes me grief, Einstein. Will some people in Heaven be more important and more powerful than others?"

"You mean just like on Earth?"

"Yeah, but based on their faithfulness to God and not on riches or strength or whatever gives them power here. I just can't see God treating some guy who goes to church only on Easter and Christmas and makes it into Heaven by the skin of his teeth having the same standing as someone who gave everything they had, including their very life."

"I can relate to what you're saying, Maria. I remember when I went through the New Testament reading about some crowns of glory that would be given to some, and also it talked about vessels of wood and vessels of precious metals."

"Jesus said that he was the servant of all would be the greatest in the kingdom of Heaven. The particular mansion that Jesus promised us in Heaven will perhaps depend on our devotion to servanthood."

"Back to your question about my reasonable mind, I'm ready to concede that Jesus has to be the Son of God. Now I just need to figure out which of all the Christian organizations is the best representative of their king. It's time to switch my focus to studying the various people who claim they have the truth concerning Christianity."

"On my gosh, Jeremy! That's so awesome! I wish you'd waited to tell me this in person. This moment would have been worth a commemorative hug."

"In that case, forget I said anything. Or perhaps give me a rain check."

"You got the rain check. Next time I see you, I'll deliver the hug."

"What's wrong with tonight?"

"Mom and I have plans already for tonight. She's home tomorrow night, if you want to, come over and study world religion from my computer."

"Sounds like a plan. How about I come by around seven?"

"Perfect!"

Jeremy heard the doorbell ringing. "Somebody's at my door. I'd better go answer. Tomorrow night I'll collect my prize!"

"See you then, Einstein."

"Good night, Princess."

*Who the heck is here, and what are they trying to sell this time?* He walked briskly to the door and pulled it open. Two young men about the same age as Jeremy stood there. They were dressed in dark suits. *Too young for FBI agents, I think.*

"Hi. My name is Elder Partridge and this is Elder Johnson. We represent the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. We've been sent to you with a special message from—"

"Come on in," Jeremy said enthusiastically.

The two missionaries looked at each other and then followed Jeremy into the house. "Are you LDS?" asked Elder Johnson.

"I don't do drugs."

"No, I asked if you were LDS, not if you took LSD. I guess from your answer that you must not be."

"You're right, I think. What does LDS mean?"

Elder Partridge provided the answer. "Latter Day Saint."

"Oh, I get it. Nope. I'm not one of you. Why did you ask?"

"Basically, nobody except members invite us into their house at the drop of hat like that."

"Well, for one thing it's cold out there. You guys want some hot chocolate?" They shook their heads. "And another thing, your timing was perfect. I was just about to start studying churches on the Internet. This way I can get your story firsthand. So tell me, what do you guys believe about going to Heaven?"

"I believe it's a good thing," answered Elder Johnson.

"I recommend it, too." chimed in his partner. "Much nicer than the other neighborhood."

Jeremy laughed. "Maybe I should be more specific. What do you believe we need to do to go there?"

"Funny you should ask. That happens to be exactly what we stopped by to talk to you about. Actually, we have a whole series of lessons that we'd like to give you that will provide all of the

information. That way we will cover everything and you can ask your questions as we go along."

"Well, my time is kind of limited, so I was hoping I could just ask the questions that I have now and fill in any gaps from the Internet. That's kind of the way I like to research. Does that work for you guys?"

"Sure...for now. If you decide later you want the whole spiel, let us know. In answer to your question about Heaven, which Heaven do you want to go to?"

"Excuse me?" Jeremy's eyebrows scraped his bangs. "Which one? I thought there was only one."

"The Bible says there are three Heavens, or perhaps three levels of Heaven, the Terrestrial, Telestial, and Celestial."

"Is that in the Old Testament?"

"New."

"That's funny, guys. I just finished reading the whole New Testament, and I didn't see that."

"Got your Bible handy?"

"My dad's is right here." Jeremy hustled over to the table where the Bible had been placed after the reading of the Christmas Story. "OK, where do you want me to read?"

"Open to *Second Corinthians* 12:2." He waited for Jeremy to get there and started reading. "'I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago, whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth; such an one caught up to the third heaven.'"

Jeremy scratched his head. "OK. I see where it mentions a third Heaven. Where do you get the names for the different Heavens?"

"Turn to *First Corinthians* 15:40. 'There are also celestial bodies, and bodies terrestrial: but the glory of the celestial is one, and the glory of the terrestrial is another.'"

"I see two names here talking about bodies. How do you associate bodies with Heaven? And where do you get the name of the other level of Heaven, which I don't find in the index of my Bible?"

"Actually this is one reason why we like to do the lessons. By now you would have known about the prophet, Joseph Smith, who started our church. He had a visitation, and he received a word during that time."

"OK. Uh-huh. So does your church have any other beliefs that are different from the other churches?"

"A few. We believe that we all existed prior to coming to Earth



in what we call the pre-existence. In order to learn the lessons we needed for eternity, it was necessary that our spirits came down to Earth and inherited a physical body."

"Do you have a Bible reference for that?"

"Actually, no, but—"

"Let me guess," Jeremy interrupted. "Joseph Smith received this information from God?"

"Right."

"One more question. What's your belief in regard to baptism?"

"Baptism is a necessary step and follows repentance for your sins. We also believe that in order to be valid, the body must go entirely under the water to become the grave from which you rise again as a new man, after dying to yourself."

"Those answers I can live with. I don't need Joseph Smith on that topic since that lines up with what I read in the Bible. So what if I get baptized in the manner you mention, by the Baptist church and not yours? What's my status in the eyes of your church?"

"In order to reach the celestial kingdom we believe there are certain things that you must do, and that only a Mormon can do them. We don't believe you'd go to Hell, but you could not enjoy the full benefits of Heaven."

"A Mormon? So you guys are Mormons?"

"You didn't know that?"

"You said you were from the Church of Jesus Christ. I didn't hear the word Mormon mentioned."

"Sorry, we assumed everyone knew."

"I know now. Well, gentlemen, this has been interesting, but I'm afraid I have to get back to my work project." He stood up.

The missionaries stood up as well. Elder Johnson held out a book for Jeremy. "We'd like to leave this with you. It's the Book of Mormon, another testimony of Jesus Christ which was delivered to the people of the Americas, known as the Lamanites. Today we call them Indians. Our phone number is right there on the front page, so if you have any questions, you could call us."

*What the heck? Can't hurt.* Jeremy took the book and escorted his guests to the door. "Nice talking to you. Take care." Jeremy shut the door. *Well, I wanted to learn about other Christian groups. I think I just got my feet wet. They seemed like really nice guys, but their beliefs are way out there. Of course, that doesn't mean they're wrong, but on the surface, the doctrine appears to be slightly weird. This requires further research.*

Jeremy went upstairs and dove into the research on his new tangent. He spent a half-hour reading about the LDS church and

their missionary program. In his trusty notebook he wrote down 'Groups I Have Studied' and underlined it. Underneath that he wrote down 'Mormons'. *I know that the Catholic Church is the biggest one in the world, so I definitely need to research them.* He wrote down 'Catholics' on his list. There was another group that knocked on their door from time to time. Paul had taught Jeremy to not open the door when they came. Like the Mormon missionaries, they came in pairs, usually women. *What the heck did Dad call them? Something Witnesses.* He wrote down 'Witnesses' and left enough room to put more later when he figured it out. *Wait, maybe I can figure it out from the Internet.*

He typed in search criteria consisting of 'witness' and 'Christian' and paged through the results. He ran across an interesting quote from St. Francis of Assisi, 'Preach the Gospel always, when necessary use words.' *That's an interesting quote. I guess he means to live a life of example for those around us and have our actions be the testimony. I'll have to look up this guy later.* He continued to click through pages and on the fourth one he saw what he was looking for. *Ahh. Jehovah's Witnesses.* He remembered that Jehovah was a name of God. The link that displayed that name also listed Mormonism. *Interesting. 'All About Cults' is the title. This looks interesting. Might as well take a little side journey here and find out what the heck a cult is.* After entering the new page, Jeremy discovered a whole list of organizations that had been deemed cults by the author. He clicked on the Jehovah's Witness link.

*God created the Heavens, the Earth and all life, and the Universe. So far so good. He also created Michael the archangel who came to Earth in the form of Jesus Christ, who lived without sin. That's a new one. Jesus was an Angel? 'He bore the sins of all mankind (except for Adam). Later, Jesus rose from death in spirit, but didn't rise in physical form.'* *Another deviation from the Bible. 'Jehovah's Witnesses who faithfully abide by God's organization on Earth will live forever on Paradise Earth. Heaven is a special place that's reserved for a group of 144,000 Jehovah's Witnesses, who have been deemed "born-again". After studying the material for at least six months, converts answer a series of questions before a panel of elders, and upon approval, are baptized into the organization. Followers are then asked to maintain a modest appearance and demeanor, refusing to vote in government elections, salute the American flag, join the U.S. armed forces, or celebrate birthdays and Christmas.'*

*Heavens to merkatroid! Some more flaky doctrine. I just*

*celebrated my first Christmas. If I joined this group, it would be my last one. I think I'll pass. My gosh, they don't even give their own followers much hope of Heaven. Only 144,000 allowed through the Pearly gates. Not very good odds. The word 'cult' must be synonymous with weird. What about some of these other groups? He clicked on the Unity Church. Followers are encouraged to stay in and practice their respective religions. But then they teach that Jesus isn't the Son of God. There's no Heaven or Hell. Well, that's enough on that group. If there ain't no Heaven involved, then there ain't no Jeremy either.*

*He clicked on a link for Jose Luis de Jesus Miranda. This one takes the cake. This guy claims he is Jesus. What the heck? The devil, Hell, and sin are non-existent, prayer is a waste of time, and the Ten Commandments are irrelevant. And this guy has a million followers. His organization, Growing in Grace, fits the basic profile of a dangerous cult which thrives on persuasion, brainwashing, and ultimately exploitation of its members. This has parallels to Jim Jones and the poisoned kool-Aid.*

*Poisoned kool-Aid. What's that all about? I have to research this mystery.*

*FIX?*

*'What exactly are religious cults?' Exactly the question on the tip of my tongue. 'With such a large number of religious organizations and movements in the world today, it's important to understand what we mean when we start labeling certain groups. The dictionary defines cult as "a system of religious worship or ritual"; "devoted attachment to, or extravagant admiration for, a person, principle, etc." According to this definition, any believer in any god is a member of a cult. In the popular media, a cult is typically defined as a religious sect whose members are "controlled" by a manipulative organization or individual. This kind of cult is usually portrayed as deceptive, requiring absolute loyalty from its followers. Members are often removed from their prior lives altogether, including their jobs, homes and families. The Hare Krishnas, Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church, and Moses David Berg's Family of Love are some popular examples of this type of cult.'*

*No wonder the scientists seek an escape from religion. This is more confusing than the words to Waltzing Matilda. OK, I'm going to read about one more group, and I'm outta this page.*

*'And, contrary to Christadelphianism, those who receive Jesus Christ as their Savior never lose their salvation (Romans 3:22-26).' This sounds like that eternal security thing that Maria was*

*telling me about. Some things that these so-called cults teach sound ludicrous, but this teaching of mainstream Christianity seems almost as ridiculous to me. Do these people read the same Bible I do? This sounds like wishful thinking to me. How many passages did I read in the New Testament that argue against eternal security?*

Jeremy sat and looked at his wall for a minute. Thoughts were flying through his head. What did all of this stuff about cults and weird beliefs mean? *Looks like Maria and I have lots to talk about tomorrow night.* He wrote down the names of all the groups he had just read about.

*Oh, yeah. I need to check on the poisoned kool-Aid.* He typed that phrase into the Google search box and clicked the search button. In surveying the results he saw the word 'cult'. *This must be it. He clicked on that link and spent the next several minutes reading the story of Jim Jones and the death of nine hundred of his followers, most from drinking poisoned kool-aid to commit suicide. The ones that refused to drink it were shot. Here we go again. Religion seems to be involved with insanity. No wonder Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris speak out against it.*

*Am I being sucked into some kind of craziness?* Jeremy sat and pondered some of the things he'd read in the Bible. The conversations with Maria about Satan came back to him. It pierced his mind that churches would be an area where Satan would strike the most, attempting to pervert the word of God to lead people of God astray. That would cause those that watched the hypocrisy and insanity to grow cynical about the presence of any truth in the religious world. *His plan seems to be working, and I almost fell for it. He wants me to think that religion is all whacked out, and there's no truth. It's like Satan created fake cheese in the maze to get people to stop looking for the real thing. Satan understands that we have an inborn desire to find God, so he creates counterfeit truths to lead us astray. But I saw truth. I felt truth. Love is the key here. I just feel it, but I'm not just talking about the word 'love', but the real thing.*

*OK. What am I going to do? Calm down and relax to start with. First of all, maybe these articles I just read are not really true. Maybe someone is slamming other religions by providing false information. That's always a possibility. So I need to verify that information from other sources before I jump to conclusions and hit my head on the ceiling. Next, if God is a God of love, which is the entire message of Jesus dying on the cross, then there are two possibilities here. First, the truth is out there and*

*very clearly marked or else details don't matter. The only thing that makes sense here is to study every word that Jesus said. What does it matter what men say, including me? If something is the foundation of truth, it has to come from the mouth of Jesus if he was the Son of God. What did Jesus say about religion and Heaven and Hell and the criteria for judgment?*

Jeremy started up his computer Bible program and scrolled to *Matthew*. Everything that Jesus said was written in red letters. He started to read everything in red and paste the important things into a file. *By the time I talk to Maria tomorrow night, I'll have all of this read and notes taken on all of it! I am going to get to the bottom of this matter.*

After forty-five minutes of intense study, Jeremy took a break. He was on his way back from the kitchen when his dad pulled into the driveway. Instead of returning immediately to his computer, Jeremy waited in the living room for his father to enter. When the door opened, Paul was startled by the tall shadow in the doorway. "Hey, Dad."

"Thanks for scaring me! Good thing I went to the bathroom before I left work. What's up?"

"I need to tap into the wisdom of your years on Earth."

"Hold on. That makes me sound like some kind of elderly statesman. I'm still in the prime of my—"

"Middle age. I know you're not exactly Father Time, but I'd like some adult feedback. Do you have time to study with me for a while?"

"You've got me for one hour."

"Sweet. Come on up to my room, and I'll explain as we go." They began the trek up the stairs. "I'm running into obstacles studying the different Christian groups. It seems that most of them teach that other groups are not going to make it into Heaven because of what they believe, slash, practice. The obvious conclusion to me was that I needed to know exactly what Jesus said about who is going to Heaven. Since he is involved in the process, I place a lot more weight on *his* words than I do some guy who types something on the Internet."

"That makes sense. So, what's the problem?"

"I'm running into issues where what I read clashes with what I understand Christianity to teach. The Bible is supposed to be the source of those beliefs, so what can I believe when I see things in the Bible that contradict Christian doctrine?"

"You raise a good issue, son. When I was with your mother I was a social Christian, I guess. I didn't really get involved in the

nitty-gritty details. It was a lot less complicated that way."

"Sorry, Dad, but I'm not going to shy away from truth just to avoid complications."

"That's my boy. Now maybe I better step up to the plate myself and cover your backside."

"So, if you went out and asked someone who isn't a believer about how to get to Heaven, what will the majority of them say?"

"They'd talk about being a good person: not killing and not stealing and loving your neighbor."

"Exactly. Why do they have that idea?"

"I suppose they know about the Ten Commandments and maybe they had religious parents or something."

"But, Dad, all of these groups I'm running into say that being good isn't enough. They're saying that you have to be one of them, which may involve being good in their particular way. And then the evangelistic Christian viewpoint is that we don't have to be good to go to Heaven, but rather we're all sinners and have to rely on Christ to erase our sins and trust him to be our attorney at the final judgment. What do you think of that?"

"You really want to know?"

"Really!"

"OK. Here is my two cents. Maybe God wrote moral laws into our hearts just like he wrote the natural laws into the universe."

"That thought has crossed my mind, especially in the studying of evolution."

"Obviously, I'm not a theologian and haven't studied the matter very much. Mostly I'm applying common sense and everyday wisdom to the situation. God is our maker and, thus, Father. I can relate to that position. I've been a son, and I've been a father. If Joni Mitchell were here now, I'd have her sing 'I've looked at parenthood from both sides now.' I'm the authority, and I say something like 'don't walk into the house with mud on your shoes.' That's a commandment. So Jeremy forgets and walks in with mud on his shoes. I get a little upset and say, 'Jeremy, why did you walk into the house with mud on your shoes?' And you say you're sorry. I might be a little upset, but it's cool. And this might go on every month for years, and it's just because you're forgetful. Do I consider kicking you out of the house?"

"I hope not."

"That's what grace is to me, Jeremy. It's that ability to forgive people for messing up. Now, let's change things a little, and you come into the house and trample mud all over the house on purpose and say, 'I don't have to do what you tell me.' Now

where's my head?"

"Buried in the sand if you let that go on for very long."

"Exactly. That's rebellion. I might love you very much, but I might be loving you right out the door, sad that you have turned away from me. Heaven is where God lives, right?"

"That's the story I hear."

"So he is inviting us to live with him. He sets the rules for the way people will treat his house and his other guests. Only people that will not rebel against him will be permitted into his house. We see reward and punishment in families. We see it in school. We see it in the workplace. The basic idea we live by is that if you do good things, you should be rewarded. If you do bad things, you should be punished."

"So where would Jesus fit into this picture?"

"Jesus came down to Earth and took on a mortal body and suffered a cruel death on the cross in order to redeem us. I look at it two ways here. Number one; there was a gap between God and man. Jesus bridged that gap with his death. He saved everybody in the world who has ever lived, is living, or will live in one shot. But those who don't honor and respect God will not be allowed to cross that bridge."

"That's some interesting homespun theology, Dad. I can relate to it. I think of the intense light that God gives off. Those that live in darkness are not even going to want to enter Heaven, much less be able to. So what do you think about the sinner's prayer? I just can't find it in the Bible. I've read through all of the words of Jesus in *Matthew* and *Mark* tonight, and Jesus never mentioned such a prayer. He does talk about obedience and behavior and righteousness. It just seems to me if the plan was that everyone needed to simply say this prayer and give their heart to Jesus, he would have mentioned that little fact while he was on Earth. Did he want people to fight over the definition of the path to righteousness, with many missing the mark because they weren't sure what they should do and believe? Is God a judge of horseshoes, where close counts, or of basketball, where the ball has to go through the net?"

"Probably not fighting, but maybe he wants discussion and cooperation on the subject," Jeremy's dad said. "I don't know. You're getting in water over my head here. A month ago God wasn't even part of my vocabulary, and here I am in the most profound discussion of my life about him with an eighteen-year-old kid."

"I know I'm in the deep end, Dad. I get this impression that

Jesus really died on that cross just as much to show us how to live as he did as a redeeming action. God didn't have to demand a blood sacrifice. He makes the rules. Perhaps the sacrifice of Jesus was a spiritual display of shock and awe. Maybe, he did it in order to try to woo men to him with love, instead of the threat of punishment. It seems that lots of people don't respond well to threats because the punishment isn't immediate and neither are the rewards. Maybe Jesus died to get our attention."

"Have you talked to Maria about this stuff?"

"We talked about it some but not at this level. I'm worried that I'm going to discover something I just can't live with, and she can't live without. For an example, check out this passage in *Mark* 9:36-37: 'And he took a child, and set him in the midst of them: and when he had taken him in his arms, he said unto them,

"Whosoever shall receive one of such children in my name, receiveth me: and whosoever shall receive me, receiveth not me, but him that sent me.' Here Jesus is saying if a man accepts a child in the name of Jesus, he will receive the Father. What does that mean? Is that a form of salvation? Is that equal or even superior to the sinner's prayer? Look at the Sermon on the Mount. Will you read *Matthew* 5:3-9?"

Paul read out loud. "'Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled. Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.'"

"Does it qualify those promises and say for those who said the sinner's prayer these blessings will be given?" Jeremy felt the pitch of his voice rising.

"Calm down. Exactly what are you trying to arrive at with all of these questions and this agonizing you're going through?"

"What I want to do, Dad, is find that the Bible shows that God is a Father of inclusion and not exclusion. That the people who live in a way they think is pleasing to him will all enter Heaven and not just people who offer him lip service and accept a free ride. There were two Mormon missionaries here today. They could be back home going to college and chasing girls and other dreams, but here they're doing what they think God wants them to do. According to what I understand, most Christians say the Mormons are going to Hell because they don't accept that Jesus did all the work for us and the Jesus they believe in is a little different. If God is a loving God, then he also has to be fair. In fact he invented



fair."

"One thing that has always bugged me, Jeremy, is that in this world of ours the reward doesn't seem to go the man who deserves it. A guy works his butt off for a promotion, and it goes to somebody who has an 'in' with the boss. Over and over that story plays out. It's not what you know, it's who you know. I hate it. With the sinner's prayer mentality, people are taught that their acknowledgement of Christ as their savior is their key to the executive washroom. Those groups look at somebody who is striving to help the poor and minister to the sick and feel sorry for them because they think the do-gooder is going to Hell because they don't have faith to just trust in God. I can only wonder why anyone would be going the extra mile if they didn't have faith that God really was paying attention and cared. What did James say about that?"

Jeremy quickly typed the necessary search criteria and pulled up the verses in *James* that his father referred to. "*James* 2:17-26 'Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone. Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: show me thy faith without thy works, and I'll show thee my faith by my works. But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead? Do you see how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect? You see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only. For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.' Interesting passage. I remembered this passage, but I didn't remember the analogy of the body without the spirit. And how about the 'O vain man?' Sounds like James was arguing with someone about the relationship of faith and works. In fact it sounds like he was having the same argument I'm coming up with."

"But what does the word 'works' mean in this situation?"

"Excellent question, Dad. Does that mean going to church or reading the Bible? Or does it involve things like feeding the poor or visiting people in jail?"

"It doesn't specify, does it? Another gray passage open to interpretation by the reader. I used to wonder about those holy guys from the old days, the hermits. They removed themselves from temptation and from the presence of other human beings who could cause them to sin. If they really wanted to be holy, they should have been down in the village teaching seventh graders. Then we'd find out how deep that holiness goes."

"Funny, Dad, but I don't think they had seventh grade back in the days of the holy hermits. We can probably find a similar

situation today where religious men hide in the holy towers of their office and live a life of sterile and comfortable faith."

"That reminds me of a movie I saw with Elvis Presley."

"Did he share his popcorn with you?"

"Let me rephrase that, wise guy. There was a movie starring Elvis Presley and Mary Tyler Moore about a Catholic church in a less than desirable neighborhood of a city. The nuns wanted to work with the people, and the boss wanted to keep them sheltered from the world. I can't remember what happened except that Elvis helped the nuns get their wish. It just makes sense that in order for someone to effectively minister to the people that are lost in society, representatives of God have to go where the lost live and not expect the lost to come looking for them. After they do, they need to get down on their level in a loving manner, so they don't come across as superior people stooping down to give charity to inferior people."

"Good thoughts, Dad. It can get kind of dangerous though. Look at what happened to the apostles. In fact, that describes what Jesus did. He got down to our level by coming to Earth as a man and being born in a stable."

"Is that all you wanted to bring up? I'm getting sleepy."

"I have a couple more passages here. Check this out in *Matthew* 5:19-20: 'Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.' Seems like Jesus was always sniping at those religious leaders of his day. They seemed to be holy, but they didn't seem to have any love. That's what Jesus preached. Love God and love your neighbor as yourself. The golden rule, do unto others just what you want done to yourself. Those guys had the appearance of holy men, but they were lip sync artists and not the genuine article."

"Are you saying that religious leaders of today are guilty of the same thing?"

"I don't know, Dad. The danger is there, I think. This is a paradox – one needs to obey the commandments, but one can't get all puffed up with pride because he does. In this I understand the theory of grace. You don't keep score but rather just go out and play your best game every day. But if you don't go out and play hard, is there grace to be found? I'm afraid my ideas are just

half-baked at this point. I need to work on them some more. I just keep relating this to football. We have guys that said they wanted to be on the team, but they never seemed to want to work hard to make the team successful. They just wanted the glory without shedding the blood, sweat, and tears."

"I hear you, Jeremy. You run into that same situation in all walks of life. Not many people put their action where their mouth is. Getting back to the sinners prayer, it seems hard for man to humble himself to pray that prayer. I know it was for me. But that prayer is followed by day after day of decision-making. I can say today that I want to follow God but tomorrow decide I'd rather be fishing for bass than for men and bag it. Do I still get to go to heaven?"

"Dad, that's exactly what I'm trying to get my arms around. You can't decide you're going to follow Christ once. You have to do it every day! And some days you might wander off the path, but he still let's you come back again. That's his grace. But if you never come back on the right path again, how can you arrive at the destination of Heaven? It's said that God looks upon the heart. If the sinners prayer is all there is, the heart becomes irrelevant and so does judgment day. The pastor just read a passage the other day that said the sheep and the goats would be separated by whether they gave food or water to Jesus, not directly, but through giving to the least of men. Yet at the end of the service he gave a call for salvation so people could accept Jesus and receive the gift of eternal life by participating in the sinner's prayer. The main question here sticks out; is this totally a gift?"

"I hope you're not depending on me for answers. That smacks to me of being on a very slippery slope. Are you sure you want to pursue this? I'm not sure what benefits you expect to obtain by bucking the consensus."

"Dad, you saw firsthand what the quote-unquote consensus in science is and does. Don't rock the boat, just accept what we say about Darwinism, and all will be well. Besides, I think religious consensus is an oxymoron."

"I understand where you're coming from. This is tough for me to say, but it must be said. You're young and idealistic. You see the world the way it should be and not the way it is. When you've lived on this planet for a few more years, that idealism will begin to fade. You'll accept life as it is instead of fighting to make it what you want it to be."

"And what if I don't?"

"It might destroy you."

"How?"

"You'll give yourself away, and there won't be anything left."

"For example."

"OK. Let's say you decide you want to help the poor. So you give this guy over here \$500 for food and fix this guy's car for \$1000 and yada, yada. If you don't measure your ability to give, thus putting the brakes on your idealism, pretty soon you'll be in the ranks of the poor needing help yourself, and then you can't help anybody. I know you don't want to hear that, Jeremy, but that's the way it is. You have to take care of yourself in order to be in the position to help others. Idealism needs to be combined with practicality or it's doomed to destruction."

"Well, maybe destruction isn't bad."

"Excuse me? When can destruction not be bad?"

"Jesus said if you lose your life then you will find it. Unless an acorn falls from the tree and is buried, an oak tree can never grow. Sometimes death has to occur for life to continue. Another half-baked idea maybe. I realize that a man has limited resources. Like the Energizer bunny, if he keeps on using up the juice, pretty soon that drum is going to be silent until the battery gets recharged or replaced. God is our battery charger. I think as long as I let him recharge me, then I don't ever have to run out of power. Does that make sense?"

"I guess it does."

"We need to learn to tap into the power of God. Connect our cable to his network to obtain the knowledge and strength and whatever else we need. That's what we need and not a sinner's prayer."

"But, Jeremy, you have to start somewhere. When you became a quarterback, did you start out learning the triple option? Or did you start out by learning to simply take a snap from center?"

"Good analogy. You can almost convince me there. I have no problem with the sinner's prayer if it's used to begin a journey. If it's considered a destination, then I have a real problem with it. Let me point out one more passage from scripture to illustrate my point, and then I'll let you get to bed. One of the most famous quotes that Jesus seems to have made is known as the Great Commission. In it he gave instructions to his disciples on the game plan. Did he give them the sinner's prayer to share with the world? Let's see. *Matthew 28:19-20* 'Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things

whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.'

"According to what Jesus said, the beginning of the road is baptism. It seems to me that this is a requirement. Notice that he still emphasized the commandments. Mark had a slightly different version of the commission command. *Mark 16:15-16*: 'And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned.' Wow. That one seems pretty harsh."

Jeremy's father rubbed his eyes and then ran his hand along the side of his face. "Son, I'm impressed by what you're coming up with here, but you have to remember that the greatest minds of history have pondered these questions already. How can you expect to resolve things they couldn't? Maybe they have resolved some of them for you."

"I might have been born at night, but it wasn't last night. I realize that many bright scholars have gone before me. What do you want me to do? Just throw up my hands and say this is beyond me? Let somebody else figure it out, and I won't have to worry about it?"

"In a way, yes, that's what I want. But you've got your life to live and you have to follow where your conscience leads. Who am I to put a lid on your box?"

"Thanks. Oh, I have one more passage, sorry. How can I forget this one? One guy back in the time of Jesus asked the exact same question I'm asking.

"*Matthew 19:16-26*. 'And, behold, one came and said unto him, Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life? And he said unto him, Why callest thou me good? There's none good but one, God: but if thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments. He saith unto him, Which? Jesus said, Thou shalt do no murder, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Honour thy father and thy mother: and, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. Jesus said unto him, If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me.'"

"I remember that one. That was the rich kid who declined the offer."

"That's right. This was the perfect opportunity for Jesus to unveil the sinner's prayer, not just for this young man, but for all the world. It seems conspicuous by its absence. I'm going to do

some research and find out where this prayer originated. To be continued, Dad. Go to bed. Love you!"

"Love you too, Jeremy." He walked from the room, and Jeremy jumped back to the computer. He typed 'Sinner's Prayer' in the search box of Google and began taking notes.

## Chapter 9

### Flying Off the Handle

On the way to Maria's house the next night, Jeremy ran the events of the last two days through his memory banks. He had spent the whole day reading and rereading the words of Jesus from the New Testament. He was now filled to overflowing with the desire to share his findings and feelings with Maria. He had e-mailed text files from each of the four gospels with the red-letter text in it, so Maria could study the same notes. *Hopefully I don't antagonize her when we talk about this. The treading of the sacred cows might be close at hand. How will she respond if I hit a sore spot? If I had to choose between following where truth leads and having Maria, which road would I choose? Oh, please, God, don't force me have to make that choice. Can I please have both?*

\* \* \*

Maria, with a big smile lighting up her face and reflecting off Jeremy's, opened the door when he arrived. Instead of the usual bantering remark to open up their evening, Maria threw herself at Jeremy, wrapped her arms around him and pressed him close to her. They stood on the doorstep locked in an embrace, which Jeremy had no desire to escape from, until Mrs. Masterson walked by and said, "Are you guys trying to heat the outdoors? You might not have to hug each other so tightly to keep warm if you were in the house."

The teenagers got the subtle hint and unlocked their embrace, entered the house, and closed the door. "Well, Einstein, does that pay off my debt?"

"With interest, Princess. Are there any other things I can do to put you in debt again?"

"I'll think on the subject. It also might work for me to find something that puts you in my debt. Payment in kind here seems to be quite appropriate."

"Works for me. Now, Maria, I have to confess I'd forgotten my hug, so that was a very special surprise. Tonight is going to be all business the rest of the way though, and I really hope that when

the night is over, you still feel like hugging me."

"I'm sure that—"

Jeremy held up his hand. "Don't be. I have some things here that might upset you. Better that you be braced a little bit instead of being surprised. OK?"

Maria's face clouded over. "All right, if you say so. Seeing the seriousness in your face and hearing it in your voice convinces me that this will be no ordinary chat session. I have a suggestion."

"And that is?"

"I think we need to start with prayer to set the tone and invite the Lord to be part of this conversation. I'm firmly convinced that we humans go off halfcocked way too often because we don't consult with the Lord first."

"I can't argue that point. Let's do it."

Maria led him over to the couch, and they sat down. She held out her hands to him, and he enveloped them in his own. "Dear Father in Heaven. We come to you tonight and ask for your presence as we discuss you, your kingdom, your will, and the roles all of those things should play in our lives. We ask that you give us holy wisdom to discern truth in all matters. Surround us with your love to prevent any type of emotional strife which can result when we humans have differing opinions and beliefs. I thank you for all you have done in our lives and for that which you will do. We seek your face and your truth, not our own, Lord. Let your will be done. Please reveal to us everything that needs to be brought out in the open and embraced. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen."

Jeremy felt that strange sensation of peace invade him again. The volcano inside him seemed to have leaked some of its pressure. The urge to discharge his arguments like machinegun fire was tempered by a feeling of security and comfort. An emotional edge had somehow been dulled, and the contention that Jeremy had been feeling inside melted. He felt like bathing in the environment instead of uttering words that he was afraid would cause the ambiance to change.

"So, Jeremy, what were you all fired up to discuss with me?"

"Funny, it seemed so important before, and now it seems like maybe I overreacted."

"To what? To something I said or did?"

"Oh, no. Not at all. Religion. I guess I got a bit carried away and was getting the idea that it was my purpose in life to set people straight with a shoot-from-the-hip bluntness that left no doubt what the truth is. Now, after your prayer, I see that I was



getting angry about the message of love and was ready to share that frustration and anger in the name of love. All of a sudden I feel ashamed. I don't know how to explain it. That inaudible voice that you've talked about seemed to have spoken to me and said that the message of love cannot be delivered in anger, and you can't beat people over the head with truth. Is that weird?"

"Not weird at all. I keep telling you that once you get tuned in to God's frequency, you will be getting little messages from time to time to help you stay on course."

"And Satan counters with his invitations to wander off the course."

"That's true, but the closer to God you get, the less distracting Satan becomes. Using the frequency analogy, it's like two radio stations that are next to each other on the frequency band. If you put the dial right in between them, you get bleeding so both come in fairly strong but neither strong enough to dominate. Turn the dial slightly in either direction and one fades out and the other becomes stronger. Get the dial set just right, and the other station becomes totally silent. Our walk with God seems to be just like that. We need to adjust our frequency so we get full reception, and Satan's messages don't reach us. That's easier said than done, however."

"I'll take your word for it," Jeremy said.

"Now, do you want to share with me those things that seemed so important a few minutes ago, but in a loving manner?"

"In a way, I'd prefer to just drink up this peace, but Jesus said he came not to bring peace. Let me find that in my notes. OK, here it is in *Matthew* 10:34-39. 'Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a man's foes shall be they of his own household. He that loves father or mother more than me isn't worthy of me: and he that loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And he that takes not his cross, and follows after me, is not worthy of me. He that finds his life shall lose it: and he that loses his life for my sake shall find it.' So if Jesus didn't come to bring peace, then maybe I'm not supposed to either. Scary thing is, this says that if I love a person more than God, I'm not worthy of God. And that takes me back to the sinner's prayer."

"Like a broken record."

"I'm sorry I keep dwelling on that point, but it seems to be very crucial to me. Of course, since I'm just a newbie at this game I

suspected maybe I was just being stupid or something, and this problem was in my imagination. Last night I found several websites that exposed the same thing that I had arrived at. I also found sites that urge people to say the sinner's prayer. Another site called it the 'sinner's snare'. Anyway, I found that other people are claiming there's no Biblical foundation for that doctrine. Other people believe the same thing I see in the Bible. That made me feel good because I was starting to feel I was alone on an intellectual island."

"Examine the way you feel right now, Einstein, and now understand why there are so many churches. It feels good to be with people who believe the same thing."

"Holy cow, Maria. You're absolutely right. Here I am, ready to go find people who believe what I read in the Bible, and maybe start my own church if I don't find it. Christianity is 2000 years old. Surely someone has found the truth by now."

"You'd think so. It's not like God wants to prevent us from finding it."

"The crazy thing is a big majority of Christians subscribe to the sinner's prayer of salvation. That one website that mentioned the 'sinner's snare', says nowhere in the Bible can you find that prayer. That made me feel good because that's what I found. But then they claimed that Satan was responsible for creating the prayer. I didn't feel so good about that. I've seen group after group point fingers at other groups and say that Satan is leading them astray. It's crazy. No wonder the intellectuals shy away from religion. They want their world to make sense."

"I hear you, Jeremy. Think of all of those who reject God and will be lost for sure. If we arrive at a point where you have to believe points A, B, and C and do things D, E, and F or you go to Hell, only a small percentage of people that are trying to follow God would make it to Heaven. That doesn't seem right. Besides, lots of people who say that sinner's prayer come very close to the Lord. It's not a snare of Satan."

"You understand the danger of such a belief. It gives a possible sense of false comfort. People who say the prayer are told that's all they have to do. God would like them to do more, but they don't have to. So if they don't do more, and God demands more from them, it would be a disastrous scene."

"I can understand your point, Jeremy, but God certainly isn't going to allow those that really love him and seek him to stay where they are."

"Maybe if the prayer of the person is truly serious, they will

always do more. The ones that just accept their salvation and go back to living for themselves would never have made the effort anyway, so what difference does it make if they think they're saved and they're not?"

"Jeremy, I hope you realize what a twisted maze you're creating here."

"I didn't create it, just discovered it. Also, I did some statistical analysis. The word 'saved' appears in the King James Version of the New Testament 104 times, eight of them by Jesus. 'Salvation' appears 164 times, only twice by Jesus. In one of those he mentioned salvation was of the Jews. The word 'religion' appears five times, none by Jesus."

"Interesting numbers."

"I like what James says about religion in chapter one, verses twenty-six and twenty-seven, 'If any man among you seems to be religious, and bridles not his tongue, but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is vain. Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.'"

"Looks like you're earning some brownie points tonight, Einstein."

"What do you mean?"

"My mom is a widow, I'm fatherless, and you're visiting."

"I don't think that's exactly what James had in mind."

"No, duh. I was trying to lighten up the mood here, Dr. Doom."

"That bad, huh?"

"Maybe worse."

"OK, Princess, let's change the topic. Are you at all familiar with the Mormons?"

"That's quite a dramatic shift in topics – from religion to...religion. Anyway, in response to your question, I have. One of my best friends back home was Mormon. I even went to church with her a couple of times. They were very nice people, very devout in their faith, and really into helping other people."

"I suspected so. You know that they're considered a cult by the people who divide the groups and hang labels on them?"

"Yes, I've heard that theory. I have a big problem with it. Why do you ask about Mormons?"

"Two of their missionaries visited me yesterday."

"Really. How'd that go?"

"OK. I found out that a lot of their beliefs come from outside the Bible and outside of common sense, to my way of thinking. I heard all I needed to eliminate them from having the absolute

truth I'm seeking."

"You've eliminated LDS and all the churches who believe in the sinner's prayer. Anyone else?"

"Jehovah's Witnesses. Did you know they believe only 144,000 people get to go to Heaven?"

"I had a good friend who was a Witness, too. Extremely brave and dedicated people."

"Nice too, I bet."

"Yep."

"I was afraid of that. Most of these groups are probably going to end up being really nice people who really try hard to love God and their fellow man. Isn't that what Jesus commanded that we do? Was Jesus down here on Earth on an ego trip to make sure he got everyone's praise and worship? I don't think so."

"You're right, Jeremy. He always said he was here to obey the will of his Father."

"That brings up another sore point with me. Why do I hear people praying to Jesus and then close in the name of Jesus or 'in your name'? I don't get that at all. The Bible says to talk to the Father in the name of Jesus. In other words, Jesus is our ticket to get an audience with the Father. Am I wrong?"

"I never stopped to think about that. Now that I do, it's a little peculiar. Do you think Jesus doesn't listen to the prayers or doesn't have power to answer them?"

"You're asking *me* about prayer? I've said a half dozen in my whole life, and I don't even know whether they were answered or not. I prayed for your safety, and you're sitting next to me, so maybe you could say my prayer was answered. But if I hadn't prayed, the chances you would still be here are pretty high, so that's not realistic evidence of answered prayer."

"I believe I'm starting to get a glimpse of what it's like for a dog to chase its own tail. It seems we're going around and around in circles. Are we making any progress toward arriving at a destination?"

"To tell you the truth, Maria. I don't know. I ran into a major snag."

"I'm almost afraid to ask you about this one."

"Jesus gave conflicting answers about salvation."

"Are you sure?"

"Remember what he told the rich young man about obeying the commandments to be saved?"

"Yeah, of course."

"Then Jesus gave the great commission to the disciples and

said whoever believes and is baptized will be saved. That means one of three things. Perhaps Jesus was misquoted and didn't say those things exactly in that way. Maybe there's more than one way to obtain salvation. And finally, he contradicted himself. I like what's behind door number two. Maybe baptized believers have an 'in' with God as a result. But that doesn't necessarily mean others who obey the commandments the best they can are going to Hell."

"My gosh, Jeremy, you're starting to skate on some awfully thin ice right now."

"Tell me something I don't know."

"Are you suggesting that Christianity isn't the only way to Heaven?"

"Maybe I am. Yeah...I think I am."

"Since you have studied everything that Jesus said, no doubt you ran across the part that says that he is the way, the truth and the life. No man comes to the Father but by him."

"Yes, I did, Princess."

"How do you explain that in reference to your suggestion about other religions?"

"Remember the bridge analogy I used the other day? Jesus is the bridge. Without his atoning death, no one would enter Heaven. Who will want to cross that bridge? Those who love God and love their fellow man. Maybe for Christians the bridge is a freeway. For non-Christians it's a footpath, and the way is harder to follow without knowing Jesus."

"I hope you're not planning on telling anyone at church about this idea. You'll not get very positive feedback, I'm afraid."

"No doubt. Another item of complexity is that Jesus said those who don't believe are damned. First of all, believe what? That Jesus is the Son of God? That Jesus is the sacrificial Lamb of God? That Jesus paid the price, so we don't have to pay anything?"

"Or all of the above," Maria said.

"Maybe. Anyway, for an example, let's take the case of two Jewish people. One has never really been presented with Jesus, and the other one has. The words of Jesus indicate that if the guy rejects Christ, he would be damned. The other guy, who never had the choice to make, could still qualify for Heaven based on his obedience to the law."

"I'm afraid that's contradictory to what I was taught, Jeremy."

"That doesn't surprise me. There's another concept that many Christians have that I find contradictory."

"Only one?"

"Actually, there are more, but this is fairly major. When you die, will you go to Heaven immediately?"

"I think so. Didn't people like Moses go to Heaven as soon as they died?"

"Consider this, Princess. The determination for separation of the goats and sheep takes places at the end of time. Judgment day doesn't happen till the Earth passes away. Until the day of judgment no man will enter Heaven."

"So where do people go when they die?"

"The only clue I have about that one is what Jesus said on the cross to the thief who cried out to him for forgiveness. He said, 'today thou shall be with me in Paradise.' That makes it sound like Paradise is the place where souls wait to find out who gets assigned eternal joy or eternal pain."

"I thought Paradise and Heaven were the same thing," Maria said.

"The evidence argues against that. Jesus said to his disciples, 'Touch me not for I have not yet ascended to my Father.' That says to me that Jesus wasn't in Heaven during those three days."

"Wow. I just thought of the Apostles Creed. It says that Jesus descended into Hell. What you're saying indicates that might not be true. You're saying there's an intermediate place where spirits of people who die wait for judgment? Are there two of them, one for those that will go to Heaven and another for the ones destined for the elevator marked 'Down'?"

"I don't know. If they were separated into two places, that would indicate that judgment had already occurred. So I guess everybody is in the same place."

"What are they doing there?"

"Oh, come on, Maria! How would I know that? I might make a facetious guess. Perhaps they're worrying about the upcoming judgment. You ever watch one of those shows where the judges vote one competitor out every week until one person wins the competition?"

"Yeah, I watched one on interior decorating."

"You ever notice how scared those people are waiting for the judges decision at the end? And that's only to see who wins some money or something. What would it be like to sit there waiting to find out if you get to live with God or Satan?"

"A very graphic illustration, Einstein. Of course, that would only be true for those who want to live with God. Those who want to live with Satan know they'll get their wish, so no worry there."

"That makes sense. A little FYI here, the Mormons believe that the spirits waiting there can decide to become believers and can even be preached to by other spirits."

"Man alive. That's some far out theology. One thing I have to question is the process of thinking. We use our brains to decide what we believe in. If we're just a spirit, how is there communication and thinking going on?"

"Oh, no you don't. Now you want me to go skating where there's no ice at all. I'm not going there."

"I don't blame you. Do you have any other basis for this belief in a Paradise waiting room?" Maria asked.

"Yeah, pure logic. If Jesus had to die on the cross so people were eligible to enter Heaven, how could Moses and Noah and the old timers be in Heaven before the Savior came to Earth? Jesus said in *John* 3:13, 'No man has ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven - Son of man.'"

"Interesting. You always see those signs at ball games that say *John* 3:16. I never saw one that said *John* 3:13. But this question doesn't determine people's salvation, so is it even worthy of talking about?"

"You raise a valid issue. There are so many things in the Bible that could be argued, but when it comes right down to it, the only ones that matter, for most people, are the ones that are involved in judgment and salvation. At least those are the only ones worth arguing about."

"Jeremy, you're talking about Christianity like it's some kind of business negotiation. You want to get a lawyer and have contracts drawn up so you know that your contract includes the right salary, perks, and fringe benefits. Maybe God would like his followers to simply pledge allegiance and say 'what can I do for you' instead of 'what's in it for me'. Does that make sense?"

"Sounds like a paraphrasing of Kennedy's famous speech. Ask not what your God can do for you, but ask what you can do for your God."

"Exactly."

"I could maybe buy that one, for someone who has advanced up the scale of faith. However, I have trouble believing it would be sellable to the general population."

"That's a big 'no duh.' Now, I hope you don't mind me keeping your feet to the fire. Let's get back to your idea that maybe there are multiple paths to Heaven. And by the way, I hope you know you're making me dizzy."

"Don't feel bad, Princess. I'm making myself dizzy, too."

Jeremy got off the couch and walked over to the gas fireplace and gazed at the flame. Suddenly he wheeled in Maria's direction. "I think what we need to do here is step back and look at the big picture. Kind of like zooming out on a map to see more territory."

"Sounds good, but I'm not quite sure what you mean."

"My dad always tells me to walk a mile in his moccasins. How about we try to put ourselves in God's place and figure out what makes sense from his viewpoint?"

"Interesting concept. Just keep one thing in mind, however. His ways are higher than our ways or in the moccasin analogy, his shoes are way too big for us."

"Granted. But to play this game we have to assume that God is even more logical than we are, since he created logic, and as Mr. Spock might have said, God can't be illogical any more than he could be stupid."

"Stipulation made. God equals logic as well as equals love."

"OK. Albert Einstein said he wanted to get into the mind of God because all the rest was details. Let me do a little role-playing to see if we can understand things better. So, pretend I'm God sitting around Heaven twiddling my thumbs. I have eternal life, but that existence is pretty boring. What can I do to liven things up? What if I create some other beings and make it possible for these creatures to live forever with me? In order for that to be interesting, I have to make it challenging for them. I'll make it a game and see who can win. I'll make them so that their nature wants them to do things the rules tell them not to do. If they obey me instead of their inborn nature, they win the game and get to spend eternity with me. And I'll punish forever the ones that don't obey me because they did what they were programmed to do. And after a few thousand years, I'll send my son down there to die a terrible death so that he can change the rules and bring life to those that will believe in him. At that point, those that don't believe in Jesus and keep doing the old thing of obeying me will end up getting punished with those that didn't obey me in the first part of the game."

Maria got up from the couch. "Are you trying to be a comedian with this anecdote?"

"No, of course not. I'm just trying to find logic in this situation – and I'm not succeeding. Did God make us to want sex?"

"Well, yeah."

"Didn't he tell us to not have sex?"

"Not exactly. The commandments say not to commit adultery."

"So it's OK if neither party is married to have sex?"



"Well, no. It says in the Bible that fornicators have no place in Heaven."

"But not in the Ten Commandments. So, if we get married, sex is good, but before that it's bad."

"Right."

"Then why did God make the desire so strong? Do you realize that lots of people reject religion because they want to have sexual freedom? One guy called it 'comfortable morality.' Does this not make it look like God was setting the high jump bar pretty high for common humans to clear?"

"It was necessary that God made us want to procreate, so that we would continue our race."

"Hold on, Maria. There's a difference between wanting to procreate and wanting to satisfy one's appetites. Lots of people enjoying marital and premarital sex have absolutely no desire to produce babies. In fact, that's about the last desire on their wish list, right after having their tonsils removed by chainsaw without anesthesia."

"You have a point there."

"Another illogical thing here is that God is supposed to be the author of love and forgiveness. How could that same author write the sentence of eternal punishment? If someone isn't worthy of living in Heaven, why couldn't they just end up like atheists think we're all going to end up – dust in the wind? If he is really good, can he torture someone forever because they messed up?"

Maria walked over to the large window in the living room and stared out at the raindrops glistening in the stream of illumination coming from the streetlights. "I don't understand what you're trying to accomplish here, Jeremy. You're causing an agitation in my spirit."

Jeremy strode to the window and placed his hand on Maria's shoulder. "I'm sorry. After we first prayed, the agitation in my own spirit subsided, but as our discussion has gone on, the agitation is building up again. The frustration is driving me bananas. Nothing here is making perfect sense. The only thing making sense right now is you. I'm tempted just to give up this search and just enjoy you."

"Jeremy, you've only been on the trail for a short time. You can't give up now. If you bag it, how will I respond to you being a quitter?"

"I don't know."

"Remember what I told you before; you can't find God just with your head. He seems to have obscured the gospel for those

who want to use their puny brains to make sense of everything. Look at the kids you've gone to school with. How many of them, on a percentage basis, are what you consider really smart?"

"The word 'really' is quite vague here, but let me give a ballpark figure of fifteen percent."

"So if God could only be found by people with a high intelligence level, then all the other eighty-five percent would be doomed because they weren't endowed with equal brain power. Now that would be unfair."

"I see that point, but couldn't God make it so it was simple in order that less intelligent people could understand, but also logical so intelligent people could find him with their brains?"

"Yeah. He can do anything he wants to. It appears that he wanted to make people squirm a little bit and step out in trust toward him. He said that the gospel would be foolishness to those that don't follow their spirit."

"Then I must not be using my spirit right now. It might be time to try."

"There's another spirit involved here as well, the Holy Spirit, also known as the Holy Ghost," said Maria.

"I've heard the term, but I'm a bit confused on this issue. The Holy Spirit is the third part of the Godhead, according to what I've read. But this again makes no sense to me. I read that God is a spirit, but then the Holy Spirit enters the picture, and it's explained that he is the spirit part of God. If God is a spirit already, how can that be? I mean isn't Jesus a spirit too, up in Heaven? Isn't he holy? So we have three holy spirits but one is named *the* Holy Spirit."

"You ask a valid question, Einstein. I don't know how you zero in on all these little issues, but they seem to be drawn to you like a piece of metal to a magnet. Maybe that name of 'Holy Spirit' isn't the best in the world. Jesus referred to him as the comforter or Holy Ghost most of the time. It was the Holy Ghost who came upon the disciples after Jesus ascended to Heaven and empowered them to go out into the world and preach Christ."

"Sounds like maybe I need to do some serious research on the Holy Ghost."

"In conjunction with that, let me tell you about a guy I ran across in my research. His name is Merlin Carothers, and he has written several books. His big one was called *Prison to Praise*. He was the one in prison and was an unbeliever as well. Through praise, he not only discovered God, but ended up as a pastor."

"Cool. Another happy ending story."

"He really considers praise to be a very special behavior. Most of his books deal with that subject. Get your notebook, and I'll write down the link to his website for you." Jeremy did as instructed. Maria wrote <http://www.foundationofpraise.org/> with very neat penmanship. It was a big deal to him that whenever he wanted, he could look at her handwriting and think of her.

"I have one quick story about his book that I found fascinating. There was a guy in solitary lockup in a prison. The dude apparently was more animal than human. His food was served to him by guards, one of whom was a Christian. One day the guard kicked a copy of the book into the hole that led to the under-the-floor confinement space of the enraged criminal. The reason he kicked it was because he loathed the guy and couldn't bring himself to drop it with his hands. Curses came up from the hole below. Apparently, with the lack of anything else to do, the prisoner started reading the book. And then he began praising God out loud. A short time later he was removed from the solitary hole in the ground. The guard testified that when the 'animal' came up out of the hole his face was radiant, and he was a totally different man."

"Nice story. I'll definitely check out that website and Mr. Carothers. I need to read some feel-good stories about now."

"Another writer you should check out is named John Sanford. One more story you might be interested in regarding the Holy Spirit is the story of an African boy named Samuel Morris. His African name was Kaboo, the son of a tribal chief, who was captured by an enemy tribe and held for ransom. The story of his miraculous delivery from captivity and journey across the continent of Africa to a Christian mission is amazing. I have the book here. My dad told me about this story a couple of years ago. To tell you the truth, I sorta forgot it about until today, and I neglected to put it on my list. Something prompted me to find it and give it to you to read." She went to the bookcase and pulled a small book off the top and handed it to Jeremy.

He glanced through the contents. "I'll knock this one out in an hour."

"I had no doubts that you would. Your speed-reading amazes me. One thing I would say, though, about reading the Bible is that it doesn't matter how fast you get through the Bible, but how well the Bible gets through you. So don't be afraid to slow down and digest a little better. And prayer is very useful, too, when you're reading the Bible."

"You know prayer is another topic I struggle with."

"Lots of people struggle with it, Jeremy. It's your number one weapon against the enemy. He'll do everything possible to keep you from praying. Remember that." She grabbed his chin and pulled it in her direction so he looked her right in the eye. "Promise me that if you ever find yourself in a desperate situation, and you're contemplating doing something stupid, pray first before you do anything."

The earnestness with which she held his chin and the seriousness of the look on her face got his undivided attention. "OK, if it's that important to you, I promise."

"Another key phrase from James indicates that if you resist the devil, he will flee from you. I know that you, with all your passion and drive to find truth, are going to present a challenge to Satan, and he will attempt to lead you astray. You must be on guard and ready for such a moment. Got it?"

"Not really, but I guess this is one of those trust-me moments again."

"Bingo."

"What I don't understand about prayer is how it works. Some people seem to pray like they write letters to Santa Claus with a list of things they want. Sometimes people have prayer answered and sometimes they don't. What's the difference?"

"You pulled another tough one out of the hat. I'm afraid, Einstein, that more brilliant people than I have tried and failed to answer that question. It seems to be an eternal mystery. Some people have claimed that it was the amount of faith in the person praying that decided the question. That seems unlikely, especially in view of the fact that some people had so much faith in their prayers and God that they refused to take their children to the doctor. When the children died, they discovered that their faith died along with their child. God didn't tell us to be stupid. The only thing we can do is accept his will in our life, or we will be fighting him constantly. We have to pray just like Jesus did in the garden of Gethsemane – not my will but thy will be done. Then when our specific prayers aren't answered, we can consider them answered with a 'No' instead of a 'Yes'."

"But didn't Jesus say that whatever was asked for in his name would be granted?"

"Yes, but I think he was talking to the disciples only. They had a special assignment that required more power. Jesus was referring to healing of the sick and raising the dead and other such matters. I don't think he was promising them a new horse or a timeshare on the Sea of Galilee if that's what they prayed for."

"Obviously their prayers for safety were unanswered since they all were killed. If God didn't even take care of his top salesmen, we can't expect him to take care of us."

"You're right. We were promised eternal life, but first we must taste death, unless we're among the fortunate ones caught up in the clouds at the second coming. Even Lazarus, who was raised from the dead, ended up dying later on."

"It's really hard to accept such a thing. You and I are so young and vibrant with health. The idea of us getting old and frail just seems impossible."

"I understand, Jeremy. But stop and think about this. When they were our age, the people in the retirement homes thought the same thing. Time marches on, and nothing stops it. You and I will change, and the world around us is going to change. You can either get ready to deal with it, or let it derail you when it comes along. And don't forget that not everybody makes it to old age. We never know when a truck is going to hit us, or something like cancer is going to come along."

"Wow. Such a pleasant topic makes a boring conversation about the weather seem quite attractive right now."

"You know, Jeremy, if you try to run from reality, you'll be running your whole life."

"Speaking of running, Maria, it's time to change the subject. I think we pushed the envelope on the discussion of religion far enough tonight. Let's talk about more down-to-earth things. You've never told me about your running success. Please enlighten me, Princess, concerning your little secret."

"Not much to say. My dad got into running when he was in the eighth grade. He continued to run when he got older. When I got old enough, he used to take me with him. It was one of the things we did together. The miles would pass by pretty quickly with him at my side to talk to. Every year on my birthday we had a three-mile race."

"And you actually like running? Most people seem to hate it, including me. It hurts. I always thought one hundred yards was about as far as I wanted to run."

"Actually, I do like it. You're right about the pain, but you learn to deal with it. I think you develop a mindset from running that allows you to endure other pain in life. In a long-distance run, you learn to pace yourself. The same is true of life, which is a marathon, not a sprint."

"Do you miss it?"

"Who said I quit?"

"Are you still running, even though you aren't competing?"

"My dad ran for a long time with no competition to motivate him. He did it for his health, both physical and emotional. So I'm continuing to run for the same reasons, but I only do three miles a day, on the days I run."

"Three miles! Only? You would almost make it down to my house in that workout."

"You're right, except I'd have to turn around and go back, doubling the workout. And there's no way I would want to run that hill up to Bonney Lake!"

"I hear you on the hill. Have you ever run a marathon?"

"I wanted to try, but my dad wouldn't let me. He said my body needed to mature first. He ran one, and despite the fact that he had run for years and was in great shape, he said it took a week to recover. As a result he never did another one because he figured he was just damaging his body. Ten kilometers, six point two miles, was the longest race that he entered after that."

"How far is a marathon?"

"Twenty-six point two miles."

"I could handle the twenty-six, but I think that point two would kill me. That'd be almost like running to Seattle from Sumner. That's incredible."

"Nah. What's incredible are the people doing Ironman triathlons. After they swim 2.4 miles and bike 112 miles, they jump off the bike and run a marathon. I tried running once after biking just six miles at a good pace. My legs felt like they were made of rubber or something."

"I have to ask you this question. What's going through your mind when you run a long-distance race? It seems to me that you can't dwell on the fact your lungs and legs hurt."

"Do you really want to know?"

"No, I was just making polite conversation, but I can't say anything about the weather because it's dark outside." He gently grabbed Maria's chin. "Of course, I really want to know. I want to understand everything about you, remember?"

"OK. But you said you wanted to quit talking about religion. When I'm on a training run and taking it easy, I pray. During a race when the pace is more intense, I use a little mini-prayer that I adjust to the cadence of my feet. So when I kick home with a sprint at the finish, I time my beat to match my breathing."

"So what was the mini-prayer?"

"Just a little mantra, if I might use that term with Christianity. Almost like something the cheerleaders would yell. 'Love you,

Jesus. Glory be to God'. It almost seemed I was cheating in the race when I drew on God's power to help me run."

"Interesting. I notice you didn't feel guilty enough to turn down the trophies and medals."

Maria blushed. "My dad said I was bringing glory to God, and the hardware would simply serve as a reminder in my future about how he carried me across the finish line when I didn't have enough strength on my own. That's one reason I keep my prizes in my room where I can look at them, but visitors to our house don't see them."

"And you have the footprints picture on your wall to remind you also. I've said this once, and I've said it a hundred times, and no doubt I'll say it again: you are an amazing girl."

"Maybe that's because I have an amazing God, who is my Father."

"Thus making you a child of the King, a princess."

"And that's the only reason I let you call me by that name, Preppie. I wouldn't want to be compared to human royalty."

"One more thing, while we're not talking about religion, cheerleaders."

"What? Cheerleaders?"

"Does the God Squad have cheerleaders? Give me a J. Give me an E. Give me an S—"

"Give me a break! Actually, we're all supposed to be cheerleaders, giving the other members of the team the encouragement to go on when things get rough."

"No worry of unemployment for God's cheerleaders."

"No. Plenty of tough times going around for everybody."

"You know, Maria, I just had a crazy thought."

"Another one?"

"Yeah. Is it possible that we humans are like toddlers trying to run a race at a pre-school, and God and the angels are cheering us on to make it to the finish line, but they're just happy that we're making the effort to get there?"

"Jeremy, are you suggesting that we are all basically lost and struggling just to go where directed?"

"That's the vision I had. Would people be mad if they arrive in Heaven and saw Joe Blow there, when they were convinced Joe was going to Hell?"

"Or Brian Witt? To tell you the truth, if someone is mad because someone else makes it to Heaven, I don't think they're going to make it themselves."

"That was a pretty low blow to bring up Brian Witt's name. I'm

starting to think that maybe he's been involved in the redecorating jobs on my car."

"Maybe so, Einstein, but regardless, if you want bad things to happen to him, you'll be damaging yourself. You brought up a good question the other day: do Christians have to do anything to get to Heaven besides accept Christ as savior. There's one thing that stands out very clearly. Jesus said if we don't forgive our fellow man, he won't forgive us."

"You're right. How did I miss that one?"

"I warned you about the speed-reading!"

"Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. But I remember a parable that Jesus told about a guy who owed a bunch of money to a rich dude. When he went to the rich man, the one in debt cried out and asked for mercy promising he would pay the debt when he could."

"The debt was 10,000 talents," Maria said.

"What was the conversion rate on the day Jesus told the parable? I have no idea how much a talent was worth."

"It was worth a lot. And the rich man, instead of allowing him to pay later, forgave him the debt entirely."

"Who's story is this? I thought I was telling it."

"I believe it belongs to Jesus."

"OK, if you're going to be a namedropper, I'll share the telling. So then the forgiven man in his joy at being released from bondage went home and had a guy thrown in prison that owed him a very small amount, despite the fact the guy begged him for mercy. Your turn, Princess."

"And the rich man found out about the injustice, and...I can't remember for sure. What did he do with the ungrateful man?"

"Ahh. I'm not sure either. Obviously the rich guy wasn't very happy, and he punished the guy, but I can't remember if he had him thrown in prison or made him pay the money back or what. I know where I can find it. Can you open up those attachments I e-mailed you?"

"Sure."

They walked over to the computer and in a minute Jeremy found what he was looking for. "Got it. *Matthew* 18:34: 'And his lord was wroth, and delivered him to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due unto him.'

"Look at verse 35. 'So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if you from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses.' I was wrong. It's not Jesus who won't forgive; it's his Father."

"That's pretty clear, isn't it? Forgive if you want to be forgiven."



"Finally I find something that there's nothing to argue about. There's no way to misconstrue that statement, and with the parable to back it up, Jesus made it crystal clear!"

"So this is the only thing you have found in the Bible that you accept without debate?"

"Well, baptism is close to being another one. The question I have now is whose baptism do I need to get? Who is authorized to baptize? And which baptism is valid? I just know it has to be a submersion process, where I'm buried and rise again in simulation of a new birth."

"I'm pretty sure quite a few churches baptize that way. I've even seen baptisms take place at a lake. Calvary has a tank where they dunk people."

"What about the Catholic Church? I still haven't gotten a chance to study them. Since they're the biggest and supposedly the first Christian church, I should do that before I make a decision. How much do you know about it?"

"The biggest church in Madison was the Catholic church, and several of my friends went there. Actually, my dad was raised as a Catholic, and his family is still Catholic, so I know more through him than from any other source."

"That hints that he changed churches?"

"Yes. He became a Baptist when he and my mother were engaged."

"So, do Catholics have water baptism?"

"Yes, they do, but not the kind you're looking for. They sprinkle baptize, and they do it to infants. My dad was baptized when he was a baby."

"What? What does baptism mean if they do it to a baby? I thought it was supposed to represent a death and rebirth and a dedication to God that I'm making as a decision. A baby isn't capable of making that decision."

"I know, Jeremy. My dad and I talked about that."

"Did your dad get baptized again, the Baptist way?"

"Yes, he did."

"Wow. That's interesting."

"There's something else you might find even more interesting."

"And that is?"

"The Catholic Church wasn't the first Christian church."

"Which one was? I thought the protestant reformation was when people broke away from the Catholic Church and protested by starting their own churches."

"That's true. A couple of things to remember here. The full name of the church is the Roman Catholic Church. There's a huge significance here."

"You mean the same Romans who used the Christians for lion bait in the Coliseum?"

"Exactly."

"That doesn't make any sense. When did the Catholic Church begin?"

"I can't remember for sure. A long time after Jesus died I think. Let's look it up on the Internet."

They seated themselves in front of Maria's computer and found the Wikipedia article on the Catholic Church. From there they jumped to the article on Constantine, the emperor who made Christianity legal in the Roman Empire.

"I found it!" Jeremy exclaimed. "313 AD was when the emperor issued the Edict of Milan outlawing persecution of the Christians. Wait, it says here that the church goes back to Peter. How can that be? This smacks of a corporate takeover to me. If you can't beat them, swallow them up. What do you think?"

"I can't help but agree with you. It was kind of a weird situation at our house. My grandma and grandpa were and still are Catholics. My dad and I got into some of the details about this belief that Peter was the first Pope, but I was under strict orders to never get into a debate with my grandparents about their church. So, I don't often say much about Catholicism to keep from getting into trouble."

"That's bizarre. A self-imposed eggshell curtain or something like that. Why can't people just have heart to heart conversations about religion, like we're doing, and not get so upset?"

"Mainly, Einstein, because the Catholic Church claims to be the true church of God, and people who were outside the church were considered lost. It's pretty hard to have an unemotional conversation when you think the other person is going to Hell if they don't listen to you."

"And now those Protestants who are quote-unquote lost, consider the Catholics to be the ones needing rescue."

"For the most part. But just because someone belongs to the Catholic Church doesn't mean they don't cling to Jesus. My dad saw a big change in the attitude of some of the members of the church over the years. They seemed to be embracing more of the practices of mainstream Christianity. The focus started to shift off the church and onto God. I know my grandparents love Jesus and walk in obedience to his commandments, and that's what

matters."

"And conversely, just because people are members of a particular church, Catholic or otherwise, that doesn't automatically mean that they're disciples of Jesus. This picture is starting to come into focus. So you don't think that the choice of church you belong to matters?" Jeremy asked.

"Not as long as you belong to Jesus too! That's my story and I'm sticking with it."

"Am I wasting my time trying to find the perfect church?"

"Probably. I think every church you examine is going to have something that you don't like. I'm curious. What would your perfect church be like?"

"I think it has to be like the church was initially. Those people were connected to Jesus. There can be no politics, division, fighting, and lording it over other people. The excitement and passion of serving have to be evident. People have to care more about following God than they do about their own little plans. Everyone has to pull his weight and help those who need it. In other words, it should be just like the cells in our body. They help each other to survive and in doing so allow the body to survive. Let me ask you a question."

"Shoot."

"Didn't I read in the New Testament that the followers of Jesus shared all things in common?"

"That's true."

"Where do we see that today? People are so hung up on having their big fancy houses and fancy cars and commanding everyone else's admiration. How many people have houses with empty bedrooms that they don't even use – while brothers and sisters in Christ are homeless?"

"I have no clue. Probably lots. Most people that are homeless are not the kind you want to bring into your nice house."

"Exactly. So, having a nice and comfortable and safe house becomes more important than ministering to those in need. We all have the American dream, but where does the Christian dream fit into that and vice versa?"

"Wow. You're becoming a radical right out of the starting blocks."

"You know how I work, Maria. If I'm going to give something my effort, I'm going to give it my best shot. James said that pure religion was taking care of the widows and orphans. Maybe, instead of debating about what's true and what's not, we could spend a little more time doing what we know is right."

"That sounds good, Jeremy, but perhaps a bit unrealistic."

"Why? Because people have to maintain their comfort zones? I found a quote that said that Gandhi would have become a Christian if it hadn't been for the Christians. He was drawn to Jesus but rejected him because his followers were lukewarm, or even worse. They wouldn't let him in some church because of the color of his skin."

"I know. The willingness of Christians to serve seems to spread across a spectrum that makes our color chart look puny in comparison. One reason, maybe, is because the message is often preached that you don't *have* to do anything for God, and so people don't."

"Bingo. Jesus said he didn't want us to be lukewarm or he would spit us out of his mouth. That's a bit graphic, but it really hammers the point home. The situation reminds me of sports fans that sit in the stands and never get excited about the game."

"Of course, Einstein. You have to be careful about judging people. That job is already taken. There's one philosophical way of looking at it."

"What's that?"

"My dad told me one day after I won a race, 'Don't ever look down upon those you beat. If it wasn't for them, you wouldn't be a winner.' I looked at them differently after that. There was no anger at some of my teammates for dogging it. We only had one coach, and his name wasn't Maria. My job was to run the best I could and offer positive encouragement to those around me. I would have been out of line to criticize those that didn't want to put out the same effort I did."

"So you're saying I shouldn't criticize those Christians that don't follow the instructions of Jesus very closely?"

"That's what I'm trying to say. It seems to me that there's more criticism applied within the body of believers than there is from the outside world. Everyone is chomping at the bit to reveal the splinter in their neighbor's eye while they go walking around with a two by four in their own."

"Aren't *you* judging *them*, right now?"

"You might interpret it that way, but remember that judging people is different from judging actions. We have to make judgments all the time. A girl has to judge a boy's character before she goes on a date with him. A mother has to judge the character of a babysitter before she entrusts her precious children to him or her. The key is that Jesus said that the way we judge others will be the way we're judged ourselves. Makes me want to be really

careful to give the benefit of the doubt."

"So how do you get somebody to get off their butt and do something positive without being blunt and to the point?"

"It's possible to build people up rather than tear them down. If we remember that God is the coach, we might be more willing to encourage and lead by example instead of trashing our brothers and sisters. In fact, we should be very careful about what we say about those who despise us. I feel we really need to give out extra love to those people."

"So the only reason Christians fight with one another is the differences in beliefs?"

"I wish that was true, Einstein. Unfortunately, just because someone embraces Jesus, that doesn't mean they've given up their own ambitions. The natural man wants to be somebody important, to be noticed and be popular. To accomplish that goal, believers often do just what worldly people do, cut someone else down to elevate themselves."

"That's hard to avoid doing sometimes."

"I know. On Christmas Eve I had a thought. Perhaps God gave me a word of knowledge. Anyway, when we all had our candles lit, the thought dawned on me that as long as we keep our candle right above us, the light of everyone's candles will reach out to Heaven. But if we reach over into our neighbor's space and hold our candle at an angle, we could block our neighbor's light. And at the same time, our own light would be deflected off to the side, so we wouldn't shine like we should."

"I sense there's a big finish to this little sermon. Do you care to, pardon the pun, enlighten me?"

"If we let our egos control us, Jesus will never be able to. We have to find our identity, our success, and our joy in him."

"Should I not play basketball and baseball because sports will define my identity?"

"If that's what will happen, Jeremy, then no. But if you can play and give the glory to God, then you will be a light set on a hill."

"Like those guys in the NFL that they interview. Some of them give thanks to God right on TV. I know a lot of people don't like that."

"And neither does Satan. Well, Einstein, it appears that all the sand has run out of the hourglass again."

"Already? Why does time go by so fast when I'm with you, except during science class?"

"You know what they say. Time flies when you're having fun."

"That certainly explains it then, because when I'm with you, I have a ton of fun."

"Ditto, Preppie. I have to admit you've added a new dimension or two to my life, especially my spiritual walk."

"Really?"

"This has been quite a roller coaster ride, but I have a feeling we're coming back into the parking lot soon."

"And then we'll get bored?"

"You know what, Jeremy. I really don't see how a Christian could ever get bored. We have a war to fight on several fronts, and there are literally billions of people who need to hear the good news. People with needs and hurts are all around us. How can anyone suffer from a lack of stimulation?"

"Excellent point. Every day should be an adventure, huh? You wake up each morning and say, 'OK, God. What are we going to do together today?'"

"Speaking of morning, if you don't get out of here soon, it will be morning. I need to get back into the habit of going to bed early and getting up early instead of doing the late shift. I'm really glad you came over and collected your hug."

"Not half as glad as I am."

"Wanna bet?"

"I'm not a betting man, but if I were, this would be a sure wager."

"No way, Jose."

Jeremy broke into song, causing Maria's face to mold itself into a mask of surprise. *"There once a man, who loved a woman. She was the one that he slew the dragon for. They say that nobody loved as much as he, but me, I love you more."*

"Wow. Nice voice, Preppie. Nice song. Where is that from?"

"It's from a Doris Day movie called *The Pajama Game*."

"Do you sing that one to all the girls?"

"I've never sung to anyone but you."

"You just get inspired by me, huh?"

"I guess. You tend to bring out the wild and crazy side of me."

"Was there any real significance to those words? Or were you just trying to prove that you were more glad than me for the hug this evening?"

Jeremy's face reddened, and he turned his gaze to the fireplace. *Oh my gosh! What have I done? I just told her I love her, in an indirect fashion. I do, but it's weird to talk about it. How do I escape this trap?*

"Your honor, I withdraw the question on the grounds that it

might embarrass the defendant," Maria said. "Well, time to wrap up this talent show. This girl needs her beauty sleep."

"Can we pray?"

"Excellent suggestion, Sir Galahad. Lead on."

"Me?"

"Your idea."

Jeremy shrugged his shoulders and then reached his hands out to Maria. "Dear Father in Heaven. I thank you for tonight. I thank you for all I have learned about your kingdom and your love and your glory. I ask for your divine protection over the two of us. Lead us into green pastures and bless us in our attempts to share with others. In the name of Jesus. Amen."

"Short and sweet and full of spiritual meat. You're coming along quite nicely."

"I'm not supposed to have an ego, remember, so quit stroking it. If I pray well, it's because God has blessed me with the talent."

"You get an A on the pop quiz covering our sermon of the evening."

*And an F for being chicken to tell you that I love you.* "I had a good teacher. Say good night, teacher."

"Good night, teacher."

Jeremy started to pull away, but then leaned over and kissed her gently on the forehead. Her eyes closed. He tiptoed to the door. She was still standing there with her eyes closed. He figured she didn't even know he was gone until the door closed behind him.

\* \* \*

As Jeremy drove home, he sang the song he had used to serenade Maria. It was time he told her exactly how he felt, not by singing a song but by saying it right to her face. *Sunday night is New Year's. We're going to the church service to ring in the New Year. Afterwards, I'm going to say that phrase that every girl wants to hear. I'll tell her 'I love you' on the first day of 2007 and every day for the rest of my life. How perfect is that plan? I oughta write soap operas.*

A new song came on his CD player. It was one that Maria had given him. He joined in with the husband/wife team singing it.

*"I'll sing you a love song 'cause you came to my mind.  
It's not a typical love song 'cause it's one of mine.  
When I say I love you, you know that it's true.*

*Even though you're number two.  
It's not that I love you less than best.  
For each day I love you more and more and more.  
But there can only be one first place in my heart.  
And you know who that's for.  
Jesus is number one in my life.  
So second place will have to do for you.  
Well, I'm counting on spending the rest of my life.  
In love with the two of you."*



## Chapter 10

### A Tree Grows in Sumner

Jeremy and Maria swayed to the music. He attempted to follow the tune. Over the course of his churchgoing experience, he had learned that if he listened closely the first time through a song, the music would usually repeat, and he would be able to follow the verses and choruses to a certain extent. *Tonight I'm taking off my spiritual straightjacket and letting it rip. Who cares if I make mistakes on the notes? It's fiesta time.*

When the clock reached 11:59:50, the crowd began the count down. "Ten, nine, eight...one. Happy New Year!" Jeremy gave Maria a big hug. They were staring into each other's eyes when Jeremy took a shot to the side of his head. He looked down in surprise and saw a beach ball. Several more balls were circulating in the crowd, tossed or punched across the room. For a few minutes it was like a snowstorm of plastic. Jeremy and Maria were laughing as ball after ball hit them or the people in front of them. It was good to enjoy some mindless fun. When the balls were gathered together, and the congregation was departing up the aisle for the exits, the youth pastor came up to Jeremy and shook his hand.

"Do you and Maria have any plans? We're all going bowling at Daffodil Lanes. If you want to join us, we'd love to see you."

"Yeah, maybe. Sounds like fun. Thanks. Happy New Year!"

"Same to you. Catch you later, I hope." He moved over and began talking to another small group of kids.

"Do you like to bowl, Maria?"

"Yeah. It's fun. I'm not real good at it, but I can get the ball down the middle of the alley once in a while."

"I haven't bowled in ages. Let's do it."

The two held hands as they exited the church into the cool air and strolled to Jeremy's car. The skies had cleared, causing temperatures to fall below the freezing mark. The windshield was just starting to frost up. Jeremy used the heater to remove the frost. His mind was focused on how he was going to begin the conversation that would lead to his confession of love as the air from the fan cleared the windshield.

"Are we going to camp here tonight, Einstein?"

"What? Oh, I guess we can go now, huh?"

"Yeah. Please be careful. My mom wasn't real happy about me being out on the roads on New Year's Eve."

"I'm always careful, aren't I?"

"Yes, you're a good driver, but even good drivers have trouble escaping a drunk driver."

"That's true."

Jeremy put in the CD with *Love Song for Number Two*. He was breaking the ice with this song, and when they arrived at the bowling alley, he'd drop the big 'L' word on her as he opened her car door. The two were singing to the music as they approached Mama Stortini's.

Splat! Something hit the window. Jeremy quickly glanced to his left and saw egg dripping down the glass. Two more missiles made contact with the Saturn.

Maria yelled out, "They're coming from that black car just behind us on the left."

"Can you see who's in it? I have to keep my eyes on the road."

"No. They're wearing masks. There's one in the back seat and one in the front seat."

*What am I going to do? There are at least three of them. If I pull over, things could get even uglier. Wait, that officer told me to call if this happened again.* "Maria, take my cell phone and call 911."

She took the phone from the cup holder between them and dialed the emergency digits. She had just finished when something shattered the driver's side window, filling the inside of the car with pieces of glass and a sudden crashing noise that penetrated the eardrums of both teenagers. Jeremy felt something hard hit him in the head, in addition to the glass shrapnel. The car went out of control, veered to the right and climbed up the curb. Maria screamed. Another loud noise filled their ears as the vehicle came to an abrupt halt in the middle of a huge tree trunk. The screaming stopped. Jeremy felt more pain upon impact as his air bag inflated. Through the fog in his head, he tried to speak. Only a croak came out.

"Maria! Are you all right?" There was no answer. The only voice he could hear was a small voice saying, "Hello. Hello. Anybody there?" Jeremy reached over and felt Maria's face. Something wet and warm clung to his hand. He pulled it away as quickly as he could in his state. The voice continued to whine in his ear like a pesky mosquito. *What the – oh, 911.* The words

were coming from his cell phone. The impact had knocked it out of Maria's hands and onto the floor near him. Painfully he stretched down and picked it up. "Hello. We had a car accident. Near Mama Stortini's on Main Street between Sumner and Puyallup. Hurry! My girlfriend isn't moving! She's—"

"Hello. Hello. Are you still there? OK. An EMT is on the way."

\* \* \*

When Jeremy regained consciousness, a fire truck's flashing light grabbed his attention. *What the -- Oh, yeah. We had an accident.* "Maria?"

"Take it easy, son. We've taken her out of the car, and she's on the way to the hospital. Now it's your turn. Where do you hurt?"

"My head and face mostly." He was blinded by tears, partly caused by shock and partly caused by the realization that Maria was perhaps severely hurt or worse. "Is Maria all right? Please tell me she's OK."

"Sorry, son, but I don't know. The other EMT unit handled her."

Jeremy could see his cell phone lying beside him. *The first call on my new cell phone went to 911.* Next to the phone lay a round white object. Even through the mental fog, Jeremy recognized that object, a baseball. *That must be what hit me in the head. Oh, no! I never got to tell Maria I love her. Please, God, don't let her die!*

The next time Jeremy awoke, he became aware that he was in a hospital bed. His head felt like the energizer bunny was inside playing a solo on his skull. A nurse entered his room. "Excuse me. Can you tell me if my girlfriend is OK?"

"Don't worry about your girlfriend. You need to take it easy."

"What's the matter with me?"

"You have a concussion and some cuts, but other than that you appear to be fine. The shock you suffered is our main concern, so please relax and try to sleep."

*Yeah right!* "I've got to see Maria! You've got to get me to her!"

"Please settle down. You can't go see her. Please relax because you're making things worse."

Jeremy was just about to continue his protest when he saw his dad enter the room. "Dad, you gotta find out how Maria is! Please!"

"Hold on, Jeremy." After a quick conversation with the nurse,

Paul turned back to Jeremy. "OK, you take it easy, son. Try not to get excited. I'll see what I can find out."

"Thanks, Dad." Jeremy sank back into his pillow and let some of the tension ooze out of him. *Dad has things under control. He closed his eyes. Father in Heaven. Please take care of Maria. She loves you and wants to serve you. Please give her that chance. Give us that chance.*

The rest of Jeremy's prayer went unsaid because he heard someone enter his room. *Dad's back!* He opened his eyes and discovered it wasn't his parent but a man dressed in medical clothing. The guy looked vaguely familiar as he stood there poring over a chart that had been attached to Jeremy's bed. He put the chart back and turned toward the patient.

"Dr. Krishna!" *No wonder he looked familiar.*

"Yes. Good memory, Jeremy, especially after what you've gone through. How are you feeling?"

"Like a tractor ran over me. I haven't been able to look in a mirror. Do I have tread marks anywhere on my face?"

"No tread marks, but you've got some glass marks. You're very lucky that none of those shards found your eye."

"So tell me how I am, please."

"Your vital signs are doing well. Your body is fighting to regain normality. I wouldn't advise that you go running around the hospital right now, but you're doing fine. Your dad said you just had a concussion a couple of months ago."

"Yeah. Football injury. This one was a baseball—" The light on Jeremy's face showed the dawning of a revelation. His voice rose in pitch as he continued. "Wait, I have to talk to the police! They have to know about the attack and the baseball and everything!"

"Settle down, tiger. The police are already on it. There was a witness who saw the whole thing."

"Did they catch them?"

"I don't know, Jeremy. The only thing I know for sure is that the license plates were covered up, so the only evidence the police have is a description of the car. It was a very common car, so it might be difficult to find them."

*If they don't, I will. They're not going unpunished for this.*

"So, I read some of those books you told me about," Dr. Krishna said. "Very interesting reading."

"Do you still think that Darwin explains all?"

"You've given me much food for thought. There are some obvious holes in the evidence for evolution, but I'm not ready to jump on the intelligent design bandwagon yet."

Their conversation was interrupted by the return of Mr. Dillon with Lisa Masterson in tow. He guided the grieving mother with his right arm. She looked like she'd fall down without him holding her up. *I never even thought about how Lisa would be feeling about this. She's got to be devastated.*

"Lisa, it wasn't my fault! I'm so sorry! I got hit in the head with a baseball—"

"Jeremy, she knows all about it. We understand it wasn't your fault. Relax."

"How is Maria? Tell me she's OK, please!"

"There's not much to tell at this point. She suffered a head injury, and she's in a coma right now. The doctor said these things are hard to predict. She might wake up this evening and be just fine. She might never wake up. Only time will tell."

"No! No! No!" Jeremy started to thrash in his bed.

The doctor appeared at his side, and Jeremy detected a sting in his arm. He felt himself slipping away. There was nothing he could do to stop the induced sleep that came upon him. The haunting sound of Maria's scream filled his head as he passed over to the other side of consciousness.

\* \* \*

When he awoke, he discovered his father sitting in the chair beside him. There was no sign of Maria's mother.

"Welcome back to the world, Sleeping Beauty."

"What day is it, Dad?"

"It's still Monday evening, January first, but we're coming up close to midnight. You haven't even been here quite twenty-four hours yet."

"Oh, no. I spoiled your bowl game watching this year."

"Don't worry about it, Champ. Your health is a lot, and I mean a lot, more important than college sports. Somebody did record some of the games for me, so we can watch them together later. By the way, Boise State beat Oklahoma in a great game."

"No way. Are you sure you're not the one who got hit with a baseball?"

"OK, you don't have to believe me, if you don't want to. But the Sooners went down."

"I don't suppose there's any news about Maria?"

"Not yet, son. Believe me, you'll be the first to know when I find out something."

"When am I getting out of here?"

"Probably tomorrow."

"Then I'm in no danger. Why don't you go home and sleep in a comfortable bed?"

"I'll be fine. It's my job to make sure you don't try to get out of bed and go looking for Maria."

"The thought never crossed my mind."

"Yeah, right. And you don't like lasagna either."

"Funny you should mention lasagna. I'm starved right now. Is there any chance a guy could get something to eat at this late hour?"

"I'm way ahead of you. The nurse made sure they put some dinner aside for you when you woke up. They have a microwave nearby where we can nuke it. All you have to do is push the little button and call the pretty lady. Make sure you leave a big tip."

"I think I left my wallet at home. Actually, where are my pants and wallet and everything else? I feel really dorky wearing these hospital pajamas or whatever the heck they are."

"You want to wear your blue jeans to bed?"

"On second thought, as long as I stay under the covers, these things I have on are OK."

After eating a large dinner, Jeremy succumbed to sleep again, this time naturally. Periodically during the night, he partially awoke and thought about Maria.

He awoke in the morning with a hearty appetite gnawing at him after having only one meal the day before. His dad went down to the cafeteria and ate while Jeremy enjoyed his breakfast in bed. While Paul was absent, Dr. Krishna returned.

"Good morning, Jeremy."

"Eh, what's up, Doc?"

"I bet you've always wanted to use that line."

"You got it. Bugs is da man!"

"I'm a Yogi Bear man myself."

"Speaking of park rangers, are you going to let me out of this zoo today?"

"I'm hoping so. We'll keep you here until lunchtime so we can overcharge you for some lousy hospital food."

"You're all heart, Doc. By the way, do you know who the doctor is that's taking care of Maria?"

"That would be me. I just happened to be on call when you guys came in, so I inherited you. Since Maria didn't have a family doctor in Washington yet, Mrs. Masterson decided to let me take care of her. Your family doctor has been contacted. He might drop by and visit before you're discharged, so you can get a second

opinion if you don't like mine."

"Those second opinions are valuable. I once went to a shrink, and he told me I was crazy. I told him I wanted a second opinion. He said, 'OK, you're ugly, too.'"

Dr. Krishna laughed out loud. "Did that really happen?"

"No, Doc. That's an old Henny Youngman joke. Henny probably wasn't big over in India. I think when he was in his heyday, India was still under British control. In fact, he was so old that maybe America was still under control of the British."

"You're a humorous guy. It's great that you can be funny under the circumstances."

"I inherited it from my dad. Actually, it's a self-defense mechanism to keep me from needing the shrink I mentioned a minute ago. Now, Doc, can you give me the inside scoop on Maria's condition? I don't want the sugar-coated version."

"I told your dad basically everything. It doesn't look good at this point, but the next forty-eight hours are crucial. If she hasn't come out of it by then, I'll bring in a brain specialist from Seattle."

"When I get out today, can I see her?"

"She's permitted visitors, but her mother is responsible for saying who can visit. You'll have to ask her. I hope you're not planning on camping out on her doorstep like your father did here last night."

"I was thinking about it. If I can't go to school, I might as well be here with Maria."

"You need to get your rest. I'll be telling Mrs. Masterson not to let you spend the night."

"You're a party pooper, Doc. I'll be back here first thing tomorrow morning. I have to tell Maria something. It might help her."

"She's in a coma. She won't hear you."

"I don't believe you. She'll hear me."

"I don't want to be cruel, Jeremy, but there's a chance that if she wakes up, she might not even remember who you are. Don't get your hopes too high."

"Don't get your hopes too low, Doc. She's a remarkable girl and a tough one, too. And she's got God on her side."

"I'm sorry, but if God was watching out for her, why didn't he move that tree or why didn't he keep the window from breaking?"

Jeremy couldn't rebut those arguments. He simply shut up and let his thoughts run wild. *Why did we go to the bowling alley? Why didn't I just pull over? Why didn't I have the police on the trail of those guys before this happened? Why did my Saturn not have*

*a passenger side airbag? Why isn't it me that's in the coma? Where were you, God?* He found he was getting fatigued by the agitation of mind, body, and spirit. *I have to turn off these thought processes, or I'm going postal.*

Luckily, his dad returned from his breakfast. The doctor excused himself and exited.

"Don't you have to teach today, Dad?"

"The college is still on winter break, but I guess it's time to tell you that I resigned. I'm now officially unemployed. So you're stuck with me."

"Are you going to teach at the high school?"

"Maybe. We'll see what happens, but I'm definitely giving it a shot if Jim Wilson decides to jump ship."

"Speaking of jumping, I forgot all about basketball. Am I going to be able to play?"

"Not for a while. I'd say a minimum of two weeks to recover and maybe more."

"Dang. This hasn't been a very good year for sports. Nothing has gone as planned."

"That's the way life works, son. An old expression says, 'I'll do such and such if the Lord is willing and the creek doesn't rise.'"

"Is that the same creek I've been up without a paddle?"

"Seems like. Reminds me of the big argument between Mr. and Mrs. Gnu. Junior Gnu was being a bad boy and Mrs. Gnu tried to get the boy's dad to dole out the punishment. Dad told her, you'll just have to paddle your own Gnu."

"Ahhhhh. You know, Dad, I could ask the security staff to have you removed from the premises."

"So, I'm the nemesis on your premises, huh?"

"I can see the headlines. 'High school athlete survives car accident but perishes from a bad joke attack in hospital'."

"Died laughing, no doubt."

"Maybe, I got those headlines wrong, Daddio. Perhaps it will read 'comedian dies with crazed-from-grief teenage son's hands gripped around his throat'. You gotta get me outta here! I can't take much more of this."

"I'll cease and desist with the jokes."

"It's not your jokes that are driving me crazy. It's helplessness. I've got to do *something...anything* to help Maria."

"I understand, Jeremy. I've been where you are. The circumstances are a little different, but watching your mom die and standing by helplessly had to be the worst thing in my life."

"Maria's not going to die, is she?"



"Maybe she already has. At least the Maria we knew. People with head injuries sometimes recover but have brain damage that alters their personality. They're almost like a different person in the same body. In this case, there's some swelling on the brain. Until that goes down, we don't know. In fact, until Maria wakes up, we don't know. All we can do is pray."

"I *have* been praying. You know, that sounds funny coming from you. After all, you're the guy who gave up on God because your prayer wasn't answered."

"I know, son. But when you're faced with situations like this, you realize that there's no other source of hope. It's been eighteen long years, but I guess it's like riding a bicycle. I still remember how to pray, and I have been, too. Lisa and I spent an hour in prayer over Maria yesterday."

"How's Lisa doing?"

"Not good. I'm glad I'm here for her and vice versa. It's just so soon after the loss of her husband. Another shock, when she's still in the grief process, would be tough for her to handle. She's going through the same feeling of helplessness you're feeling. Getting out of this bed isn't going to make that go away, I'm sorry to say."

"At least I'd be able to see Maria and talk to her. There's something important that I need to tell her."

"I'll talk to Lisa and see if you can go in right after you get dismissed from here."

"That would be super. Thanks a bunch."

"Now, your release is contingent on everything checking out after lunch. I'd suggest you get some more sleep. I'm going to go home for a while and do the same."

"I'll try. I can't remember having slept this much before, so I doubt I can go back to sleep again."

"If you're like me, some reading could do the trick. This little magazine I picked up might help." He handed Jeremy a magazine entitled *Guideposts*.

"I'm on the way out. See you this afternoon. Love you, Jeremy." He grasped his son's arm.

"Love you too, Dad."

Jeremy opened the magazine and began a fascinating journey reading stories of hope. Every article in the magazine was geared to give people optimism and build their faith. One of the articles was about the victim of a coma. That story had a happy ending. *Hopefully Maria's will too.* He finished the entire magazine without getting sleepy. Now what was he going to do? He launched into a silent prayer. Five minutes later he ran out of

things to say. *How does someone pray for an hour?*

He still wasn't sleepy. Thoughts and questions resumed their assault on him. *What will I do if Maria doesn't make it back? How will I go on?* Visions of the times they had shared together flashed through his mind. He had only known her for four months, but she had become the most important thing in his life. The words to the song they were listening to at the time of the accident stabbed him. *Maria is supposed to be the second most important thing in my life. God is supposed to be first. How in the world am I going to arrive at that point?* After remembering all the good things, the scene of the accident replayed itself. It had happened almost in the blink of an eye. One small piece of time overrode all of the accumulated total of the rest of his life. *It wasn't fair. All the work of a lifetime could be washed down the drain in one second.* A vision of a house of cards came to him. *What a man works for is like a house of cards. At any moment a breeze or person or a cat can come along and send the whole thing crashing to the ground. All of my eggs are in one basket, even if I distribute them around. He who loses his life shall find it.*

Jeremy was still lost in deep thought when his lunch arrived. He was lost in serious eating when his dad arrived soon afterward, looking much more presentable. "Nice of you to get cleaned up for me, Dad. I'd hate to have my reputation ruined. By the way, that magazine you brought me was great. Can you get some more? I might be sitting around Maria's room quite a bit, and it would be sweet to have something uplifting to read."

"Not a problem. I borrowed that one from a sitting area around the corner. They had a bunch of them. Nobody will mind, I don't think, if we borrow a couple more and take the first one back. We can stop in on our way down to Maria's room."

Paul busied himself getting Jeremy's personal effects ready for an exit from the hospital.

"I must have had some brain damage!" Jeremy uttered.

Paul stopped what he was doing to look over at Jeremy. "Why do you say that?"

"I never even thought about the Saturn. How did it come out of this ordeal?"

"The insurance company totaled it. That means they decided it wasn't worth getting fixed. We'll get enough money to partially pay for another one. I guess we'll go car shopping when you're up to it."

"I'm gonna need wheels to get to the hospital. I can walk the two miles to school for a while, but this is too far away. So, better

early than later in this case."

"Remember that I'm not working right now. You'll probably be able to borrow my car when you need it, at least most of the time."

"Cool. This way I can wait until Maria's ready to go car shopping with me." Jeremy looked at his father to see what kind of reaction would follow his wishful thinking. He detected a slight wince on his dad's face that didn't make him feel warm and cuddly.

"One thing I better tell you before we go to Maria's room. She's not going to look the way you're used to seeing her."

"I realize that, Dad. She hasn't had time for a shower and makeup and all the stuff girls do to make themselves gorgeous."

"That's not what I'm referring to, son. Maria had some damage to her face as well as her head. There's some bruises and cuts. To be blunt, you need to brace yourself for the sight."

"That bad?"

"I think so."

"It's a good thing Maria doesn't worry about her looks. She's just a natural beauty, and it hasn't gone to her head in the least." Jeremy glanced at the clock. "Dr Krishna, come on down. I'm sick of this place."

"Perhaps I could entertain you to make the time pass faster. A song and dance routine, perhaps? Stand-up comedy act?"

"You know what, Dad. If you follow up on one of those suggestions, I might end up really sick and need to stay in the hospital."

"Everybody's a critic."

"They are when they see you perform."

Before the banter got a chance to move up to the next level, Dr. Krishna walked into the room.

Jeremy threw his hands in the air. "Doc. Perfect timing. You just saved my life."

"Again?"

The doctor poked and prodded, took blood pressure and pulse readings and finished up with the usual breathing test utilizing a stethoscope. "Hmmm."

"What? Now what?"

"I'm afraid I've got some bad news for you."

"What's the matter?"

"The nurses say you're eating us out of house and home. They told me you need to be dismissed."

"All right!"

"Remember, no jostling your body, especially your head."

You're allowed to take a shower now if you want to clean up."

"Thanks, Doc. I'd like to say it's been fun visiting you, but don't be brokenhearted if I don't come back."

"Fine by me, Jeremy. I hope we never see each other again, except socially. Maybe someday we can pick up the thread on Mr. Darwin."

"That might be fun. Actually, you will still be seeing me until Maria is dismissed, too."

"Yeah. I suppose. Well, please accept my apologies, but I have to run off to the next patient. See you around."

"Bye, Doc."

"Thanks, Dr. Krishna," Paul said.

"Welcome."

"Dad, give me ten minutes for a quick shower. I'll be right out."

Paul started to say something and stopped. *I know what he was going to say. He was going to ask what use was it to get cleaned up for someone in a coma. Maybe she'll be coming out of that coma while I'm standing watch.* As he prepared to enter the shower, Jeremy saw his dad pick up the copy of *Guideposts* and start reading.

After the slight delay, Mr. Dillons, senior and junior, walked slowly down the hospital corridor. They made a stop to trade in one magazine for two more. "Jeremy, don't forget to put these back where we got them."

"I won't; don't worry."

When they arrived at Maria's room, Jeremy stopped. He remembered his dad's warning about having to brace himself. Now was the time. To minimize the shock he tried to visualize what he would see. Lisa was sitting in a chair next to the bed when they entered. She got up, walked over to Jeremy, and gave him a big hug.

"You're a real sweetheart to watch Maria so I can get some real sleep."

"Not really. I'm just doing what I want to do."

"I'm glad you want to. Let me see. I should be back here about six p.m. Does that work for you?"

"Stay away as long as you want."

"I don't want to be away at all, but I have to, or I'm going to collapse. Take care and call me if you need anything, or if anything changes with Maria."

"I will. Bye."

Jeremy watched Lisa and Paul exit the room together. He was now alone with the girl he loved. Now was his chance to tell her

so. He approached the bed, keeping his eyes focused on the floor and the bed. When he reached the place where Maria lay, he finally permitted his gaze to fall on her face. *Oh, my God!* His imagination hadn't been powerful enough. He glanced away and felt a little faint. *If I didn't know this was Maria, would I recognize her, even without the tubes?* He stared at the wall for a couple of minutes. *It doesn't matter. I'm not about to let her appearance delay my mission any further.*

"Maria, I don't know if you can hear me or not. Some people believe that people in a coma can hear, and I'm hoping they're right. I just want you to know that everything is going to be all right. Also, I want to tell you something that has been in my heart and on the tips of my lips for quite a while. This isn't how I envisioned this scene taking place. I looked forward to an amazing reaction from you and similar words from your mouth. Today, it will just be a one-sided conversation, but I'm going to believe that inside your heart is doing flip-flops, and your body will be responding to help you get better. I love you, Princess. I can safely say I have loved you ever since I first laid eyes on that blue dress and your long dark hair. The first time our eyes met, I was hypnotized. John Sebastian and the Lovin' Spoonful sang about it. I discovered that magic in a young girl's heart, and I'll never be the same."

Jeremy looked down at the still body before him. He surveyed the beautiful hands lying motionless on the bedspread. The urge to pick one of them up was strong. He feared he would be jeopardizing her health somehow. As gently as he possibly could, he bent over and gave her a butterfly kiss on her right hand. "Come back to me, Princess. I need you!"

The emotional drain was taking a toll on Jeremy. *I need to sit down.* The chair that Lisa had been using was pushed up against the wall. Carefully, he lifted it and carried it to the side of the bed. There was a video and a note sitting on the chair. Jeremy picked up the note and read:

*'Dear Jeremy. This is a movie which has great historical and sentimental significance to the Masterson family. Please watch it with Maria. She loves this film and has always gotten inspiration from it. Lisa.'*

He looked down at the title, *John Baker's Last Race*. The cover featured a runner. "Oh, God, please let Maria run again. Let me watch that beautiful hair flow in the wind."

The machine in the room was a combination VCR and TV. Jeremy put the movie in and adjusted the sound with the remote he found on top. *One thing for sure is I don't have to worry about waking Maria up with the noise. In fact, if noise would do the trick, I'd crank the volume to the top so it would wake her up.* He took a seat in the chair and adjusted the position so he could see the TV better.

Thirty-four minutes later Jeremy wiped tears from his eyes. His heart was gripped by the story of a young man who wasn't even wanted by the high school cross-country coach. In his first race, he beat the defending state champion and broke the course record. Before becoming sick he became the eighth fastest miler in the world. On a Thanksgiving Day John Baker died of cancer. Thirty-six years later, Jeremy mourned for him. It was obvious why this movie would have been important to Maria, being a runner. The fact that her father had died of cancer made it even more meaningful. Jeremy wondered what other significance the movie had to the Mastersons. John Baker's theme ran through his head. *You're never beat till you quit.*

He turned to Maria. "I know you heard the lesson before, Princess, but hear it from my lips tonight. You're never beat till you quit. And don't you dare quit. I promise you that I won't." *I have a feeling that John Baker will never die as long as that movie is shown.*

*This coma situation reminds me of the TV show, Everwood. Will Maria be in a coma for a long time, and I'll get attached to another girl and be stuck between the past and the present like Amy was? No way. I'm staying away from girls as long as Maria has a chance.*

His thoughts shifted back to the accident. *Why do good people like John Baker and Lance Masterson get cancer and die? Why doesn't it happen to people like those who put Maria in this coma? If there was justice in this world, that's the way it would be. Seems like God's interest in judgment is after life and not during it. Perhaps I need to dole out some justice of my own. How would I find the culprits?* He started fantasizing his heroic capture of the bad guys and their subsequent punishment. *I can borrow Dad's shotgun. That might come in very handy.* He started getting himself riled up and was tempted to leave Maria to begin his search. *I promised Lisa I'd stay here till she came back. I don't break promises.*

He sat back in the chair and grabbed one of the *Guideposts*. After he had read a few stories that were nice but not particularly

earth shaking, he ran into one that rocked him to his foundation. The article told of a seminary student in Chicago who was beaten by a gang of youths on board the bus he was driving. The youths were arrested, and his bitterness against them raged. Before the trial, however, he had a change of heart. The Spirit of the Lord caused him to forgive and to start to love those boys. In the trial he stood up and asked the judge to let him serve the sentence that was to be handed out to the toughs. The judge said that had never been done. The young wannabe minister stood up and told the judge how Jesus had done that very thing 1900 years before. Despite the earnest plea, the judge wouldn't let the bus driver serve the sentence. He spent a lot of time visiting the boys in jail and led several of them to the Lord. Later he started a significant ministry in the south side of Chicago. He had turned his scars into stars.

Jeremy was stunned. How could someone find the love to offer to serve the prison sentence of people who were guilty? The story of Jesus became much more real to him suddenly. *Here I am, ready to shoot somebody. That wouldn't make Maria very happy.* All thoughts about guns and revenge melted in the heat of a self-imposed light of interrogation. *What if these kids just did something stupid? What if they had just smashed their own house of cards at the same time they knocked Jeremy's to the ground? Maybe their own lives had gone up in smoke in the same second, and they were sitting around right now, worrying about their fate and feeling sorry. I don't have a clue, but I do know that I can't hate them. In fact, I have to forgive them, if I expect God to forgive me for my sins. Of course, I haven't been baptized yet. Maybe I could hang onto my hate for a little longer. No, there's no use. I can't escape my own conscience. I know Maria and Jesus would want me to forgive.*

He bent his head one more time. "Father in Heaven. Please forgive me for my anger and hatred. Whoever did this is guilty under the law, but I forgive them. Take this bitterness from me and cast it as far away as possible. Don't let me wallow in it a second more. I ask you to bless the culprits. Penetrate their hearts with your Spirit so that they'll turn their lives around and follow you. Show them the way, Lord. In the name of Jesus I pray. Amen."

Part of the burden he had been carrying around since the accident lifted immediately. The anger and hatred were gone. Unfortunately, Maria was still in a coma so the relief was only partial. *Is this how the rest of my life will go? People will do stuff to*

*me, and I will forgive them? That will require a lot of help from God. I don't think I could live like that in my own strength.*

Jeremy finished reading the two magazines. There was still time left on his tour of duty. *What am I going to do? Maybe I should give Christian TV another chance.* He turned on the TV and flipped through the channels until he found the Christian network. Ironically, the speaker was talking about healing. Jeremy watched until Lisa arrived.

"Hi, Jeremy. How are you doing?" she asked.

"Under the circumstances, I'm doing just fine. The last few hours have been very inspirational. I've learned a lot about life and love and forgiveness."

"I take it you found my note and watched the movie?"

"I sure did. It was great. Thank you for letting me share some of your family's treasures."

"It was my pleasure. I'll let Maria tell you the story of her involvement with that movie. If you're not in a hurry to go, I'd like to tell you the importance of this movie in the life of my husband, mine, Maria's, and even yours."

"There's nothing I have to get home for. In fact, I have to stay here till my dad comes back to pick me up."

"OK, then I'll tell you the story and—"

The door opened, and Paul entered.

"Hey, Dad. You're just in time for a treat. Lisa was just about to tell me about the importance of this movie in their lives." He held up the box containing the VCR tape.

"I'd love to hear it. Lisa, why don't you sit down in the chair, and Jeremy and I can sit on the floor."

After they were seated, Lisa told the story not only of the movie but also of the piece of paper on their wall at home. Finally, Jeremy understood the significance of the Bulldog Compact. He had a new appreciation for Lance Masterson.

When Lisa finished her story, some of the emotion that she was feeling made its way into her eyes. Jeremy and his dad stood up. He wanted to go hug Lisa, but his father had seniority in this matter, and it was he who ended up trying to bring some comfort to the grieving woman. Jeremy felt very strange watching his father holding the mother of the girl he loved. It reminded him of that first hug he and Maria had shared just months before. *Lisa is definitely good for him. It's nice to see that he can be good for Lisa as well.*

After a couple of minutes, Lisa spoke. "I'm fine now, Paul. You better get that son of yours home and feed him. He must have a



big appetite by this time."

"No doubt you're right." Jeremy nodded almost violently. "OK, tiger, we're on our way. Call me if you need anything, Lisa."

"I will. Good night."

"Can I relieve you again in the morning?" Jeremy asked.

"Are you sure? Don't you have school?"

Jeremy looked over at his dad. "School's a pretty dangerous place for a guy with a concussion, don't you think?"

"Have it your way. On Monday, though, you need to be back in the classroom."

"Done deal. I'll be here about eight and take the whole day shift. I have a bunch of books I want to read, so this will give me a good chance to dig in." He went back to the bed for one last look at Maria. "Good night, Princess. Pleasant dreams. I'll be back tomorrow, and we'll continue our conversation. I love you." He looked over at his dad and Maria's mother. He felt a little embarrassed saying 'I love you' in front of them. They showed no reaction to it that would make him feel self-conscious. He felt like Lisa had welcomed him as part of her family. Dickens' words came back to him yet again. 'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.' *Can't we ever have the best of times and the best of times?*

## **Chapter 11**

### **There's a Kind of Hush**

Paul decided his son's first meal away from the hospital should be more special than something he pulled out of the freezer. Instead of driving back home, he navigated toward Olive Garden.

"Where you going, Dad? Freeway entrance is the other direction."

"Well, kiddo, do you think you could handle some Italian food tonight?"

"I believe that's one of those questions that answers itself. You know Italian is my favorite."

"Yes, I do. Olive Garden, here we come."

"Cool. You know, Dad, I've made a big decision."

Paul took his eye off the road for a second to look at Jeremy. "That sounds ominous?"

"No, not ominous, just important. I want to be baptized."

"Really? Do you think that will help Maria recover? Are you trying to make a bargain with God?"

"No, that's not it at all. I was pretty sure I was ready before the accident. This just makes my decision more urgent. I've discovered life is very fragile. One small misstep and it can be over. I don't want to wait until it's too late."

"But what if Maria doesn't come back to us?"

"That shouldn't matter. This business is between me and God. I already understand becoming a Christian isn't like joining some club that has guaranteed benefits. It involves making a commitment to devote myself to God's will and plan for my life. Does that make any sense to you?"

"I'm afraid it does. It just seemed to be too big a step for me to take years ago. I didn't want to give up my comfort-zone. My religion was just an add-on to my life, like a spice. Instead of being the main course, it was just the pepper on my potatoes."

"So you never lost your life so you could find it again."

"That sums it up pretty well, Jeremy. At your mom's funeral, it was really awkward. All these people wanted to make me feel better. They came up to me and quoted Bible verses and made other comments. One of the things that was said stuck in my mind

and my crow."

"What was that?"

"*Romans 8:28*. 'For all things work for the good of him who loves God and is called according to His purpose.'"

"And that bugged you?"

"I hate to admit it, but yeah. I wasn't sure I loved God, and I certainly had no clue about being called to his purpose. What's his purpose?"

"Simply to share love, his and yours, with others. I think the war with Satan is also involved. We're called to be soldiers in his army. What's the purpose of an army?"

"To defeat the enemy. Sorry to say, my enemies seemed to be mediocrity, lack of riches, and slavery to a job. Those are the things I fought against."

"Jesus said, 'Seek ye first the kingdom of God and its righteousness, and all other things shall be added on to you.' How much was going to be enough the way you sought happiness? How were you going to hang on to it if you did get it?"

The car pulled up into the parking lot at the restaurant, and Paul looked over at Jeremy. "Once again you're making me feel like the kid. This role reversal doesn't fit very well for me. But, on the other hand, I see that's just another ego trip where I neglected to get a good map before leaving. I'm reaching a point where I might be willing to ask for directions."

Jeremy reached out his arm and locked it with his father's. "Love you, Dad."

"Right back at you, son. Let's go eat and continue this conversation inside."

For the first time Jeremy could remember, they were able to get a table without waiting. After being seated, Paul resumed their frank discussion. "So when are you going to get baptized?"

"Calvary has a baptism scheduled for next Sunday."

"Wow. That soon, huh?"

"No time like the present. I don't know if this is a good time for this topic or not, but I was wondering about.... Well, maybe this is none of my business, so forget it."

"Forget it? How can I after that introduction? Let me guess what you're wondering about. Perhaps you'd like to know where I stand with Lisa?"

"Wow. Good guess!"

"You're somewhat right that it's none of your business, but on the other hand, you are my son, so that makes it part of your business. To be blunt about it, I have to say I have feelings for

Lisa I thought I could never have for another woman. She reminds me a lot of your mother, not in appearance, but rather in personality."

"You've got yourself into an interesting situation then. You either need to become a real Christian or quit falling in love with people who are."

"No beating around the bush for you, is there?"

"Maybe life is too short to walk in circles."

"Perhaps, you're right. I guess I just have cold feet about getting into the passenger seat of God's car instead of driving my own. It's hard for a guy to willingly give up the independence that he's earned by becoming a man."

"I understand, Dad. We like to be in control and call the shots. We have enough situations in life where we're powerless. It's nice to reserve one area of life where we're the boss."

A waitress interrupted and took their order. In the interim, Jeremy studied his father's face. He could almost picture the mental tug of war that must be going on in him. *To be or not to be. He needs to decide that question.*

Paul kept his voice low as he sought Jeremy's eyes. "Getting back to religion, I guess I just couldn't see the attraction in fighting the good fight."

"You admitted that you never really tried. If I can use a football analogy, you would be like a bench warmer, sitting on the sideline and never getting into the game. It's impossible for you to understand what all the excitement is about, and why players will sacrifice themselves for the team. You actually need to get out on the field and experience the action to know how stimulating and exciting it can be."

"Leave it to Beaver to come up with another football analogy."

"Yeah, Mr. Cleaver, because they work. I understand them, and so do you. Trouble is, you can't use the mentality of a thirty-day free trial. Let me try it out for a while and see if I'm satisfied. It doesn't work that way. The call is for you to commit regardless of whether you like it or not."

\* \* \*

After the usual feeding frenzy, the stuffed diners returned home. Jeremy went up to his room immediately. *Gosh, it's good to be home again. There's a special feeling about being home. What will it be like when this house is no longer mine? I must make my own home, one that will make me feel comfortable and secure*

*and, hopefully, will include Maria. However, she said that for a Christian, Heaven is really home and that earthly dwellings are just a temporary place of residence. Maybe I shouldn't let myself find my security in something temporary. It's like a rug that can be pulled out from under me at any time.*

He put away all the personal articles that his dad had delivered to him at the hospital. Thoughts of tomorrow took front stage in his mind. *I need to get everything together for the trip to the hospital.* He marched over to the stack of books waiting for his blitzkrieg reading tactics. The book called *Samuel Morris* went into his short stack for the trip. *In His Footsteps* was the next book he picked up and moved to the new stack. *Just in case I finish both of them, let me take one more.* He paused and scratched his head. There were some books here he had never seen before. *Where did these come from? Must be Dad's contribution to the cause.* One of them was called *Tough Times Never Last but Tough People Do* by Robert Schuler. *It looks like Dad bought me books that help people deal with adversity. What the heck? I'll check it out. Maybe this book will teach me how to be tough enough to handle the bad times but still allow me to be tender on the inside. What's this one? Prison to Praise. That sounds familiar, but this book wasn't here two days ago. Merlin Carothers is the author. That sounds familiar, too. Where – oh, yeah! This is the guy whose website we visited when I was over at Maria's.* He dumped that book on top of his to-go pile. *That should keep me busy for a day.*

*OK, what else do I need to take? Music! I'll take my boombox and some CD's for Maria to listen to. What should I play? Her CD of favorite Christian hits for sure. And the other Christian CD she gave me for Christmas. I'll take some oldies stuff from Dad's collection. Tomorrow I'll ask Lisa to bring some of Maria's own Christian CD's from home. We'll have her worshipping in bed in no time. Speaking of worship, maybe I should try a session. My music may not be the best, but I need to get close to God right now to take away some of my pain.*

Jeremy put his CD on the machine and started the music. Then he knelt at the side of his bed and tried to worship as he and Maria had done in her bedroom. After several minutes of trying to connect, Jeremy turned the music off. It just wasn't working. *I can't feel God. Is it because Maria isn't here? Perhaps the music is wrong? Maybe it's because of my unbelief?* He went back to the side of his bed and knelt down one more time. "Dear Father in Heaven. I need you. Please don't leave me here alone. And

please let Maria fully recover from her injuries and soon. I know my dad doesn't think I should try to make a bargain with you, but maybe he's wrong. Maybe you want that. If you will spare Maria, I'll devote the rest of my life to serving you. I'll fight the good fight. No, I'll fight the great fight. Just let her be at my side to give me the courage and strength to fight. In the name of Jesus. Amen." That feeling of peace that he normally got from praying didn't sweep over him.

He remained slumped over for a few moments in thought and unofficial silent prayer. *Can God hear me pray when I don't talk out loud? I hope so!*

When he got off his knees, he glanced at the clock. *I should probably get to bed early tonight. I need to recuperate and gain strength for my long vigil with Maria tomorrow, but there's a little time left for me to surf and find out more about comas.* He fired up his computer and browsed to Google, which soon allowed him to find a website full of information on the topic.

He read out loud to make sure he got everything. When he got to the end, he sighed heavily, clasped his hands together behind his head, and cranked his neck up toward the ceiling. *OK, what have I learned here? Number one: most comas don't take more than two to four weeks. My gosh. Does that mean most of them last that long? Are we going to have to sit with Maria for four weeks? I guess that beats the alternative of not being able to sit with her at all. Number two: recovery is usually gradual. So I can't expect her to sit up one day and be ready to play dueling wits with me. Number three: I need to find out what her Glasgow score was to see what her chances are. Four and under, and we're in trouble. Eleven and above gives her an 87% chance of recovery. Number four: she might have to be retrained on how to walk, talk, and eat. My gosh. Walking and talking we learn as a baby but eating? I thought we always knew how to eat. This is unbelievable. Maria could wake up an infant. That would mean she probably wouldn't even remember who I am, much less remember what we had. Number five: there's a chance that she'll be a vegetable.*

*I don't like the odds in this situation. There seem to be more negatives than positives. What can I do? There must be something I can do to make a difference – besides just talk to her when I'm at the hospital and play music for her.* He looked at his computer screen. The Internet was useful in doing so many things. Maybe he could somehow tap into its power. He tried new search criteria consisting of 'prayer request'. Soon he was looking

at a site [www.prayerrequestsite.com](http://www.prayerrequestsite.com) and typing in his request for a prayer for Maria. He copied the request to his clipboard, so he wouldn't have to type it again in case any other sites took prayer requests. Another site at [www.unityonline.org](http://www.unityonline.org) allowed him to paste the stored text for a different audience. He continued down the list of matches on his search until he had submitted his request to ten different organizations. *Now I feel I've done something.* Thoughts of the television speaker on the topic of healing came to him. *I need to study healing.*

Once more he searched on Google. There were too many hits with just 'healing'. He added the word 'God'. Within a few minutes, it became painfully obvious to Jeremy that there was too much material to cover in the short time he had available this evening. *I'll come back to this tomorrow night. This does look like a fascinating topic.*

After finishing the preparatory tasks for bed, Jeremy lay on his back and looked up at the ceiling. He thought of the man in the white suit on television who supposedly healed people. The incidents in the New Testament that involved healing came back to him. *Jesus raised people from the dead. Surely he can raise them from a coma. Who on earth did Jesus grant the power to perform healing miracles? Obviously they can't heal by their own power. If they really can do it, they have to somehow be tapping into God's power. Is it possible that God created physical laws that govern certain life events, including miracles? If scientists explored this question, could they perhaps discover the secrets to those laws? Is a miracle just the overriding power of a superior natural law, like the speed that allows a rocket to leave Earth's gravitational pull? Maybe, but I don't have time to discover that. Maria needs a miracle now.*

\* \* \*

Paul was at the kitchen table when Jeremy came down in the morning for breakfast. "Do you need your car today, Dad?"

"Nothing going on today that I can think of. Go ahead and take it."

"Thanks a bunch. I'll be extra careful with it." Memories of the last time he was behind a wheel flooded over him. He hardly heard his father's reply.

"I would appreciate that, Jeremy."

"By the way, I did some reading about comas last night. I think I better not wait for Maria to go car shopping. Can we go looking

tonight?"

"If you're healthy enough to go looking for wheels, maybe you should be back in school."

"I'm afraid I'd be pretty worthless in class. My mind isn't going to be on the schoolwork." *That's nothing new since I met Maria, but Dad doesn't need to know that.*

"I understand that mentality. Fine. After dinner tonight, we'll go check out Used Car Alley."

"No chance for a brand-new one? I see where Saturn has 0% financing for sixty months. If we get one of those, I can help make payments now and before the five years is up, hopefully, I could be making the whole payment."

"That's not a bad idea. We'll stop at Saturn first and weigh our options."

"Cool! Thanks, Mr. Cleaver."

"Any time, Beav."

"Dad, I think I've matured beyond Beaver. I'm more like Wally now."

After a quick breakfast, Jeremy grabbed his sack lunch and backpack and drove to the hospital. As he walked through the halls to get to Maria's room, he thought about hospital life. *Every one of these rooms has a story to tell. Somebody in there is going through a physical problem: some temporary, some chronic, and some fatal. Seems like you have to be a very special type of person to work in a hospital, where so much suffering goes on. It has to be a drain on morale. It's hard enough for me just visiting the place.*

Mrs. Masterson looked like she was ready for a long daytime nap. She gave Jeremy a big hug, one that both of them needed. "I'll be back at four p.m."

"That's too soon. Why don't you make it six? That'll give you time for enough sleep and to get caught up with things at home."

"Are you sure?"

"No problem. I'm going to be reading in any event. It doesn't matter to me whether I read here or at home. In fact, I could stay until bedtime if you want."

"No. You need to go home and get some good food and spend some time with your father. I'll be back at six."

"I almost forgot. When you come back, could you bring some of Maria's favorite CD's? I'll leave my boombox here so you can play them if you want. Then I'll be able to play them tomorrow."

"That's a great idea, Jeremy. I'll do that. You're such a sweetheart!"



Jeremy's heart still glowed after the door shut behind her. *It's amazing what words of encouragement can do. There's power in the human tongue, for good or for evil.*

He stood over Maria's bed and looked down on her. She was in a different position than when he left last night. *Had she moved? Is this evidence of recovery?* "Good morning, Sunshine. Did you miss me? I missed you like crazy. I brought some music for you to listen to today. I hope you can hear it, and you like it. If you prefer something different, please feel free to sit up and tell me so."

After getting the CD player situated next to a power source and in a good location for Maria, Jeremy started the music playing. Before he sat down, he took one last look at his sweetheart. *She looks just like a doll, although most little girls wouldn't want to play with a doll with a bruised face and tubes sticking out of her mouth and nose.*

With a big sigh, he plopped down in the chair and pulled the books out of his backpack. *Which one should I read first?*

*Prison to Praise* got the nod. Jeremy soon became engaged in the story and lost track of time. He had set the CD player for continuous play, so it continued at the beginning of the CD when it reached the end. When he finished the book, it dawned on him that the same CD had played again at least once and part of another time. He got up, changed the disc and returned to Maria's side.

"Wow! What an amazing story, but you already know that. Just thought I'd refresh your memory. Mr. Carothers went from a troublemaker to a pastor. He discovered that through praising God for all things, blessings resulted. For example, one man's daughter was in a mental institution and really messed up. The father praised God that she was there, and shortly after she was totally back to normal. The author cited one instance after another where praise brought results."

*Could those have been coincidence? All of them? It can't hurt to try this out myself.*

Jeremy was just about to get on his knees and start to praise when the door opened, and two nurses came in. After greeting Jeremy, they rolled Maria over to a new position and made sure that all the tubes were functioning correctly.

"May I ask why you moved her?" Jeremy asked.

"Sure. If someone stays in the same position for an extended period of time, they develop bedsores. We're just trying to make sure she doesn't suffer from that problem."

"I see. Thanks for the info."

When the nurses, exited, Jeremy thought about his plan for praise. *First of all, I can't really cry out the way I want to. Secondly, someone might burst into the room and find me doing this. That would look a little weird. It's better to wait till I get home and do it there.*

He put the praise book in his backpack and grabbed the book about Samuel Morris. Maria had highly recommended this one, which wasn't very long. He began the story and was gripped immediately. His attention was really grabbed when the young hero prayed for another boy to be healed, and he was. The pages seemed to turn themselves as Jeremy raced to find out how the story ended. He finished the book without interruption and sat in contemplation of what he had just read.

This time he summarized the story for Maria from his chair. "This young African prince made the unbelievable journey from Africa to New York City with no money, looking for a man who could teach him about the Holy Spirit. What were the odds of getting off a boat in New York City, even in 1890 when this occurred, asking the first person you see for help in finding a particular person in the big city, and having that person deliver you to the doorstep of the party in question? Gotta be astronomical odds against that. Ironically, the boy taught the man about the Holy Spirit. In the end, the boy died from an illness contracted at college. The Heavenly Father, whom he spoke to so freely, apparently spoke back to him as well, telling him his work on Earth was over shortly before he died at twenty-one years of age. Even after his death, Sammy's power to convert people continued with his grave becoming a place where people went to find God. This story went far beyond any inspirational story I found in *Guideposts*. God seemed to have had his hand on that young African man."

He studied Maria's face when he finished. She didn't seem to be impressed with his book report. *Oh, she's read it already.*

It wasn't even lunchtime yet, and he had read two books. The feeling of satisfaction he always got from reading a book was overshadowed by the content of these two stories. *Will my life ever be the same after reading these? Only if I let the memory of what I read here die. I must not let that happen.*

He walked back over to Maria. Very gently he laid his hand on hers and prayed for her to rise up and walk, just like he had read about. When he finished, Maria lay there as still as before. *Obviously, I don't have the healing touch. Is this something I can*

*ask God for? It must be something that can be granted because the disciples weren't born with it. I need to pursue not only healing but this Holy Spirit thing. God's power here on Earth appears to be tied to the Holy Spirit.*

Jeremy figured it was time to change the CD again. This one had played at least twice. He glanced through the stack of oldies that he had brought. They were mostly songs of love and pop culture. He had loved listening to these songs since he was a young kid. Today, trying to figure out which was the best music to help Maria with her problem, he arrived at the conclusion that the most talented and famous of singers and musicians weren't going to bring Maria out of her coma. It just didn't seem right to replace the music elevating God with worldly stuff, even though it was innocent stuff like the Carpenters. He put Maria's favorite Christian songs back in.

After eating his peanut butter and jelly lunch, Jeremy picked up the *In His Steps* book. He assumed that 'His' referred to Jesus. He read the back cover and discovered he was correct. The phrase 'what would Jesus do' had originated from this book. Jeremy remembered seeing the WWJD merchandise in the Christian bookstore. This book was where the whole marketing strategy had been born. For the third time that day, he became totally drawn into a story. This one was fictional but was almost as powerful as the previous true stories. Jeremy put the book down when he finished and looked at the clock. Three hours had swiftly passed by. He stood up, stretched his stiff muscles, and walked over to the bed.

"How are you doing, Princess? I just finished another book. Are you ready for another episode of 'The Dillon Notes'? This unemployed vagrant knocked on the door of the pastor's house when the pastor was preparing the sermon. The raggedy man asked for work, so he could have something to eat. The pastor told him he was sorry and shut the door. The next day the man shows up in church and interrupts the service with his own sermon. He asks what would Jesus do, and then he faints. The pastor is shamed by what he has done and sets out to do what Jesus would do. His effort spreads to the entire town, leading to some interesting changes in behavior among the people. Everybody's life is changed because instead of doing what benefits themselves, they do what Jesus would have done. The book was based on a verse from *First Peter*: 'Hereunto were you called; because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow his steps.' When you wake up,

you'll need to read this for yourself because my explanation is way too inadequate to do justice to the story."

He stood there for a moment, watching her for any telltale sign of movement. Her hand seemed to move slightly, capturing his attention. *Was that my imagination?* He kept his focus on that hand and a couple of minutes later, he was sure it moved again. "Maria. Are you there? Can you hear me?" There was no response.

A couple of nurses entered the room.

"She moved! I saw her hand move. I think she's waking up."

The nurses stood over her for a minute. One turned to him and said, "I'm sorry, son. Coma patients sometimes move. It doesn't mean that they're coming out of the coma. I don't see any signs of recovery."

Jeremy's heart dropped. He'd gotten his hopes way up, and now they crashed back to Earth. *It's a good thing the nurses came in when they did. I might have called Lisa to tell her that Maria was waking up. She would have been crushed to rush over here and find out this was a false alarm.*

The nurses moved Maria and exited, apparently satisfied that all was well.

The door opened again a few moments later, and Dr. Krishna entered.

"We meet again, young man."

"Doc. I'm glad to see you. I wanted to ask a question about Maria."

"Sure. What's it?"

"What was her Glasgow rating?"

"How do you know about Glasgow?"

"Same way I know about evolution and intelligent design. I studied comas."

"I see. Maria scored a five."

Jeremy rolled that around in his head. *Four and below was bad. She was right at the borderline of being in the not-much-hope group.* "That's not very promising."

"I'm not going to argue with you, Jeremy. However, I want to do another test on her now and see if there's any improvement." Jeremy watched as the doctor ran Maria through a series of response tests. The doctor shook his head. "Sorry. No change to report."

Jeremy's shoulders slumped. The doctor laid his hand on one of them. The disappointed boy looked up.

"Don't give up hope yet. These brain injuries are unique. None

of them is exactly the same, so we can't predict the outcome with one hundred percent accuracy. It would be nice if she scored higher."

"Thanks, Doc."

"Are you going to be all right?"

"I'm not the one who's injured here. It doesn't matter if I'm OK."

"Yeah, maybe true. But we need to keep your spirits up. Maria needs to have a positive spirit around her at this time."

"I see. I'm fine, Doc. It's all in God's hands anyway."

The doctor coughed and excused himself, making a quick getaway.

Jeremy watched the door close. *I forgot. Doc doesn't believe in God. I hope God believes in Doc.*

Jeremy began reading his fourth book of the day, though he found little exuberance for reading further. He started watching the clock to figure out how much time he would have to remain here. For the first time in his life, he was looking forward to being out of Maria's presence. *I'm feeling impatient. Something has changed. Something is wrong with me.*

\* \* \*

Shortly before six, Lisa arrived. Jeremy didn't tarry long. He not only wanted to get out of the room but had a desire to smash his fist into something. He told Lisa goodbye and bolted from the hospital. *What's up with this desire to hit something?*

When he emerged back into the outdoors, he discovered the wind had become brisk. In his agitated state, he didn't pay much attention. Without hesitation, he jumped into his dad's car and started it up. *Slow down, idiot. This is dad's car. Don't wreck this one or you might not have to worry about Maria because Dad will commit mayhem.* He literally forced himself not to let his emotions influence the way he drove home. It started to mist so he turned on the windshield wipers.

About halfway home, a loud splat hit the window. He screamed and hit the brakes. With a pounding heart, he pulled the car over on the shoulder. The window was clean except for the raindrops running down the glass. Jeremy noticed that the rain had gotten heavy and the wind gusted from his left. *Duh! The noise was simply big raindrops blown into the window. I'm losing it. What has gotten into me? I'm as skittish as a cat in the dog pound.* He heaved a big sigh and took a deep breath. *I know what*

*happened. I associated the noise with the accident. It was like déjà vu all over again. Am I going to flinch every time I see a tree now? Is every loud noise on the window going to give me a panic attack?*

After a couple of deep breaths, he carefully pulled into the right lane on the highway and made it home a few minutes later. When he entered the house, he found his dad on the couch watching the news. "Holy tapioca pudding, Batman. Are you ready to go looking for a new Batmobile?"

*I forgot about the car.* "I'm ready I guess, but you drive."

"Of course. Did you think I'd entrust my metallic steed to you twice in one day?"

"No funnies tonight, OK, Mr. Rickles?"

"What's the matter, Champ?"

"I'm not sure. I thought Maria was waking up today, but it turned out to be a false alarm. Then I found out she got a low score on the test that predicts recoverability. Something changed in me. I was handling this issue fairly well. All of a sudden, I got angry about what was happening, and now things seem to be hopeless."

"Sit down for a second and let me explain something to you." Jeremy followed his father's instructions. "When somebody is grieving, they have to go through a process which has five steps. The first step is denial. You just really weren't accepting the situation as real."

"That sounds weird, Dad. I knew exactly what the score was, and I studied comas. There was no denial going on."

"On the outside maybe. But you were having a problem believing that this really happened. Since you like to use football analogies, let me use a scene from your past to illustrate my point. When you were a sophomore, you were trying to score a touchdown and held the ball out toward the goal line to break the plane. Just—"

"Oh, not that story. I don't want to be reminded of that."

"Hold on, here. Bear with me. I think this is a perfect illustration. Just as you were about to put the ball over the goal line, a defender came along and stripped the ball out of your hands like a pickpocket and ran ninety-nine yards for a touchdown. You saw it happen and even felt it happen. Yet you couldn't believe it happened, even though you knew it did."

"OK, I get your point. So maybe I wasn't accepting that Maria really was in a coma. Why did I get mad now?"

"The second stage of grief is anger. You simply passed from

the first stage to the second."

"And what joys do I have to look forward to as this process continues, if it does?"

"Bargaining, depression, and finally acceptance."

"Wow. Here I thought I was at the end already."

"I know, Jeremy. I went through this when your mother died."

"Hey, wait a second. I already was in the bargaining phase."

"You can go through the stages in a different order or you can even go through more than one stage at a time."

"Great! Now I can look forward to depression."

"Let's get going, kiddo. We've only got a few hours till the car dealers close."

"Yeah, I'm ready, but what about dinner?"

"We can hit Burger King on the way over and get it to go."

"Works for me."

They got into the car and began the journey. Jeremy started to daydream of the last time he went car shopping. It took place a couple of months before, but the scene was so fresh in his memory banks that it seemed like it happened yesterday.

The phone had rung, and Jeremy discovered Maria was on the other end.

"Well, Preppie, I have a big surprise. Or maybe I should say I got a big surprise."

"Meaning?"

"My mom said it was time I got my own car. I can spend up to \$5000. Wanna take me out car shopping?"

"Your mom is going to let you buy a car without even looking at it?"

"No. But I can pick it out, and then she'll check it out. I can't go car shopping without a car, so I was hoping that you were free and—"

"Free? No way. This will cost you."

"Oh. I was talking about free in time. How much will it cost?"

"Several."

"Several what?"

"Smiles."

"How many smiles per gallon do you get?"

"You just keep 'em coming until I tell you the debt's paid."

"That's a pretty steep price. Hmm. I guess you leave a girl no choice. I'm ready any time you are."

"You mean to smile?"

"That too, I'm giving you fifteen minutes to arrive, after which I start lowering the number of smiles that will be distributed. That







## Chapter 12

### Between a Rock and a Hard Place

The next morning Jeremy walked out into the driveway and surveyed the new Saturn Ion they'd purchased the night before. It was his first brand-new car. This should be a moment of excitement. He should be jazzed to be getting into it and taking his first solo ride. How could he exult in a new car smell when Maria lay in the hospital? He'd have to delay the celebration of the new addition to the family until Maria woke up.

In addition to some new books, Jeremy had grabbed his hand exercisers. If the temptation to hit something came on him again, he'd squeeze those things until his hands couldn't close. *This is day four of the coma. How much longer can I keep this up?*

\* \* \*

He quietly entered the hospital room. *Lisa looks even worse than the day before. She has to go back to work soon. I'm going to have to go school next Monday and now Dad is going to be employed again. We won't be able to keep someone with Maria twenty-four seven. If this thing lasts much longer, will we reach a point where we only visit periodically?*

"Good morning, Jeremy. Are you ready to take the baton?"

"I think so, Mrs. M." He walked over and gave her a big hug.

"I brought the music you asked for and put it on the table. I also brought in another movie I thought you might like to watch with Maria. And you'll want to check out the contents of that big box under the table."

"Thanks. By the way, I got a new car last night."

"I know, Jeremy. Congratulations. Your dad told me when he came over last night after you went to bed."

"Really? I had no clue he was sneaking out of the house."

Lisa smiled slightly. "You're not going to ground him, I hope?"

"It was for a good cause. I'll let it slip this time."

"That's very generous of you. Now, I need to get some sleep. They want me to work a four-hour shift this afternoon. Thank you, again, for all you've done."

"Welcome." The 'have a nice day' cliché was right on the tip of

his tongue, but he bit it off. *How does someone have a nice day when their only child is in a coma?*

Jeremy's curiosity prompted him to walk over to the table to check out the box Lisa had mentioned. It was full of envelopes. He pulled a handful out and glanced at the names. Some were addressed just to Maria, some were addressed to himself, and some were addressed to both of them. They had no stamps on them. He opened up one with his name on it. He glanced to the end first to see who sent this one. It was from his basketball coach. He read the get-well wish enclosed in the letter and put it aside. *That was very nice.* He opened another one and found it from one of his football teammates. *These must have all come from the high school. Instead of mailing them, they just dropped them off en masse.*

He sorted through them and picked out several addressed to Maria. After opening them and extracting the letters, he walked over to the bed. "Good morning, Princess. I have a surprise for you, today. Some of your friends are sending their love to you. And some of these are probably from people you don't even know." Slowly and with deliberate pronunciation, as if he was speaking to a foreigner whose grasp of the English language was less than perfect, he read each of the notes in his hand to her. "All these people are waiting for you to come back to school. You wouldn't want to disappoint them, now, would you?"

He put the letters away and went back to Maria's side. Kneeling on the hard floor, he prayed for several minutes. His knees hurt when he finally got up, but he ignored the pain, which was insignificant to the pain inside him. "Well, Maria, your mother brought a favorite movie of yours to watch. If you like it, I'm sure I'll like it."

Jeremy put the tape into the VCR and sat down to watch *Joni*. *Wow, this is a true story, and the girl in the movie is actually Joni.* The beginning of the story almost made him sick. Joni, a pretty young sixteen-year-old, dove into shallow water and hit her neck on a rock, causing her to become a quadriplegic. *Once again one second of a person's life dictates the rest of it.* He gutted it through that painful beginning and watched a beautiful story unfold of a courageous young woman who overcame the odds. Despite the lack of use of her hands and feet, she became a well-known artist and an author. God obviously had his hand on this young woman. He turned off the machine and put the movie back in its case.

"I see why you like that movie so much. It's an inspiration. When God has his hand on you, good things happen. Maria, God

is watching over you and his plans for you are for good. Everything's going to be OK. Now, I'm going to read some more books. I'll tell you about what I read later. I'll put some music on for you first. Hopefully, you'll like what I choose."

He walked over to the table where the CD's had been placed and shuffled through them. *B. J. Thomas? Is this the same B. J. Thomas who sang Hooked on a Feeling and Billy and Sue, and Raindrops Keep Falling on my Head and lots more? Holy cow! It is. I didn't know he sang Christian songs.* Jeremy read the titles of the songs. One was entitled *I Need a Miracle. This one's going in first. We do need a miracle.*

Jeremy started the music and sat down to read. He found himself listening to the words of the songs instead of reading. The song about the miracle was good, but he found two other songs even more interesting. *Satan You're a Liar* was a hard-hitting number. The second one spoke the what-if question concerning Jesus coming to visit the USA in modern times:

*'If they saw Him riding in, long hair flying in the wind,  
Would they love Him down in Shreveport today?  
If they heard He was a Jew and a Palestinian too,  
Would they love Him down in Nashville today?  
If they saw Him talk with ease  
To the junkies, whores, and thieves,  
Would they love Him out in Wichita today?  
Would the rich men think it funny  
If He said give up your money?  
Would they love Him up on Wall Street today?'*

*What would the answers to those questions be? Would they love him in Sumner today? Or would they crucify him in a 21<sup>st</sup> century way? Maybe I should be saying 'we' here instead of 'they'. How would I react to Jesus in person? Hopefully the same way that I am now through study. Speaking of study, I'd better get back to it.*

The book he read was rich with good motivational material. He read with interest but not with the fervor he had for the other books. When he finished, he felt something was missing from it.

*Coach would love this stuff and put lots of it up on the locker room wall. The critical thing is, even though it talks about Jesus, the Spirit of God seems to be in the far distance. It's all about what I can accomplish through my effort. The 'I can do it if I try hard enough' attitude. I like the thought, which might be great in normal*

*life situations, but I can't bring Maria out of coma by giving it my best shot. Even the doctors can't bring Maria out of a coma with their best efforts. Lord, I need you here. Dr. Schuler says, 'If it's going to be; it's up to me.' I say, 'If it's going to come true; it's up to you.' Please don't let me down, Lord. Maria and I can do great things for your kingdom together.*

He returned to Maria's side. "Not much to help us with the coma in that book, though when you recover, I think you'll want to read it and apply some of those principles to help make it through tough situations in life where attitude and effort are important.

"I'm going to have a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. If you care to share it with me, you'll have to sit up. Peanut butter really sticks to the roof of your mouth, you know, so no lying down when you eat it. Not interested, huh? Well, in that case, I brought an extra granola bar. I know you love those. OK, if you'd rather eat that stuff from the tube, who am I to lure you away with granola? Just don't say I never asked you. Actually I'd love to hear you say I never asked you. So, go ahead, make my day. Giving me the silent treatment, huh?"

Jeremy put a new CD in and went back to his chair to eat his lunch. While he worked on the peanut butter, he started reading more cards and letters from the box. He stopped right in the middle of a bite and read with his jaw in a state of suspended animation. He let the letter fall to the floor.

He suddenly jumped up, spat the half chewed bite into the wastebasket, and strode over to his backpack. After a little rummaging around, he pulled out his handgrips and started squeezing. A quick glance into the mirror across the room reflected a madman. He didn't care. Jeremy pumped with both hands until his left hand could go no more. The right hand continued to squeeze for a couple more minutes. Finally, it too was maxed-out. He tried to puff his chest out till he tore his T-shirt, a la The Incredible Hulk, but the material was stronger than his chest muscles. The physical exertion had done the trick. No longer did he have the overwhelming desire to kill. He put the handgrips down, picked up the letter off the floor, and walked over to where his dormant friend lay.

"Maria, I think you'll find this typewritten note interesting: 'Dear, Jeremy. I don't know where to start. I just want you to know how bad I feel inside, and how stupid I was. Please forgive me. I didn't throw the baseball, but I was throwing eggs. I was with some tough guys from out of town, and one of them got a bright idea to throw the baseball. Harassing you with the eggs and stuff

was a form of jealousy. I wanted what you had. Popularity, talent, smarts, and Maria. It wasn't fair you got it all. I won't mention what you did to tick me off because you might know who I am if I did. Anyway, it was my game to make your perfect world a little less perfect. It wasn't supposed to end like this. Those guys are not my friends anymore. Probably, they will never come back to Sumner 'cause they're scared to death. So, you don't have to worry about another attack. I apologize as much as I can and hope that Maria will be all right. You'll, no doubt, understand why I don't sign this.'

"Well, Princess, I already said I forgave them. Now that I know it's one of the kids I go to school with, I almost took back the forgiveness. Dad says my grief has gone into the anger phase. I'm mad at this guy and his friends. It's not in my heart to forgive them. No doubt you would give this turkey a big hug and tell him all was well. That's not so easy for a male. I choose to forgive for you, Princess. And I choose to forgive for you, God. Now would the two of you choose for Maria to wake up so I can get something in return for this sacrifice of forgiveness?"

Jeremy detected a small noise and whirled in the direction it had come from. He wasn't alone in the room. "Dr. Krishna. I didn't hear you come in."

"Obviously. I'm sorry."

"How much did you hear?"

"I heard enough to know you have a decision to make."

"I was afraid of that."

"So you're one of the followers of Jesus?"

"Yeah, well almost. I will be for sure after Sunday when I get baptized."

"And you're willing to forgive the people who put Maria in this condition for this man who has been dead for 2000 years?"

"That would be dumb, wouldn't it? But Jesus was only temporarily a man, and he isn't dead."

"I suppose you know this because you did the research?"

"Yes, I did the research, but there's lot more than head knowledge involved. It's pretty hard to explain. The life of a man goes way beyond what we can see and hear."

"Are you not going to tell the police about this letter?"

"I don't think so. The guy is sorry. Will it bring Maria out of the coma to punish him? Will it improve his life? Will it improve my life? I don't think so. Punishment is a deterrent. It's supposed to prevent people from doing bad stuff in the first place. When they break those rules, is the important thing that they do the time to pay for the crime or that they learn a lesson about life and love

and forgiveness and don't repeat their mistake?"

"You make some valid points, but without punishment how do people learn?"

"Doc, I once read about a tribe in Africa. When somebody breaks a rule, instead of isolating them off into a prison, they all congregate and give the offender a hug and let him know that despite the screw-up, he's still loved. How many people inhabiting the jails of the world just needed a loving touch somewhere along the way to deflect them from the path they took?"

"I never looked at it that way before. This is a fascinating conversation, but now I must get back to work. Thank you."

The doctor checked Maria over and left without saying goodbye. It looked like Jeremy had upset him in some way. *This has to be tough on the doctor too. I haven't even thought about his feelings. Father, I lift up Dr. Krishna to you. Obviously, he doesn't know you. I ask that you bless and guide him in his medical practice, so that he might be a blessing to many. More importantly, I ask you to touch his heart that he might find you. In the name of Jesus. Amen.*

That special feeling washed over him again. *Why, when I prayed other times, did I not get those feelings? What was different? Was it perhaps because I was praying for someone else and not for myself?* As he was pondering those questions, a new song started playing with the words 'praise looks good on you'. *Oh no. I totally spaced out last night with the car-buying trip. I forgot to try praise. I'm going to borrow one of Maria's praise CD's and do some praise and worship this evening.*

\* \* \*

When Jeremy arrived home, after being relieved by Mrs. Masterson, he went straight to his bedroom. His fast might only last until after his session with God, but he wasn't going to make himself comfortable and sluggish with food. *Which do I start with – the worship or the praise? They always start church with worship, so I'll do the same. It must be like a spiritual warm-up.* He put on the CD he had chosen from Maria's collection and knelt by the bed. He'd heard these songs often enough that he could sing along part of the time. He lifted his hands and tried to envision sitting in the lap of his dad when he was just a kid. "I want to be where you are. Dwelling in your presence. Feasting at your table. And surrounded by your glory. I just want to be with you."

After several songs, he got up and stopped the music.

*Wanting to be with and loving God were like wanting to be with Maria. I desire to be in Maria's presence because she's an awesome girl. God is even more awesome. If we look at him as the loving father he is, instead of as a cosmic policeman, it's certainly easier to get into a mood of worship. Maybe this is the difference between relationship and religion that Maria talks about. Worship really is just a way of expressing affection. These are love songs to God. Why didn't I see that before? Why don't other people see that and learn to long for the God that created them? To long for one who wants to be with them and that will always be there for them?* The song from the B. J. Thomas CD came into his thoughts, *Satan You're a Liar*.

Now it was time to try the praise routine. "God, I praise you that you still have the whole world in your hands. I praise you that Maria is in a coma. I praise you that I'm helpless about the situation. I—" *I can't go on anymore. This seems...stupid.* "God, I'm going to level with you. I don't like doing this. Maybe that's why someone wrote the song about bringing the sacrifice of praise into the house of the Lord. It is truly a sacrifice.

"The thing that bothers me is that Jesus came down to Earth and promoted humility. To have you demand and require our praise seems to be egotistical of you. Those two concepts just seem contradictory to me. This kind of praise in our world is called butt kissing. I tell you how great you are, so you can give me what I want. That doesn't seem right. If that's what you're all about, then I'll be disappointed. Did you create us just because you wanted someone to tell you how great you are? People like that are not very popular on Earth. I can't believe you would be at the level of an inferior human who has ideas of superiority. I'm missing something here, besides Maria. There's some piece to this puzzle, and it might be a corner piece, that I just can't find. I understand you wanting our love, but please make me understand this thing about praise. Why do you desire that we tell you how good you are? You already know that!"



## Chapter 13

### The Flight From the Bumblebee

Friday came and went with no change in Maria's condition. Jeremy started his shift early on Saturday, so Mrs. Masterson could get a full day of work and some sleep into her schedule. Jeremy finished watching the movie *A Walk To Remember* and sat in the chair weeping for a few minutes. *Why did I watch this movie? Shouldn't I have watched The Marx Brothers or Three Stooges or Steve Martin or something else funny? Why did I have to wallow in the mire of doom and gloom? Why do people have to die so young? Couldn't they have a chance to get more of a taste of life first?*

His pity party was rocking away when he was startled by the noise of an alarm going off. He looked over toward Maria. One of the machines next to her was flashing red. He stood up and briskly walked over to the bed. *I better call a nurse.* He was just about to press the button when the door flew open and a nurse ran in. Another followed within seconds. The first one tended to Maria. The second one approached Jeremy.

"Young man, I'm afraid I have to ask you to leave now. We have a little situation."

Jeremy wanted to ask what she meant by 'situation', but he sensed the urgency in her voice. It wasn't the time to ask questions. He grabbed his backpack and exited. A doctor and another nurse flew past him on their way to Maria's room. *Now what am I going to do? Should I call Lisa and wake her up? She needs her sleep, but I'm supposed to call if any change occurs. If Maria dies while Lisa is at home in bed, she'd never forgive me. If this turns out to be minor, and I cause her to lose some sleep, I'm sure she'll forgive me.* With trembling hands he dug his cell phone out of the side pocket of his backpack and dialed the Masterson number.

A sleepy voice answered. "Hello."

"Lisa, this is Jeremy. There's a problem at the hospital. An alarm went off, and the medical team came running in like it was really serious. I did—"

"I'm on my way." The phone clicked in his ear.

Using the speed dial, he called his home. Luckily, his dad was

home. "Dad, I thought you might want to know this. Something is wrong with Maria. The doctor and nurses are working on her. They kicked me out of the room. Alarms were going off and people running around and—"

"Calm down, Jeremy. Does Lisa know about it?"

"I just got off the phone with her. She's headed to the hospital."

"That makes two of us. I'll be there in a few." He hung up without saying goodbye.

Jeremy was just putting his cell phone away when an employee of the hospital walked up and ripped into him. "I saw you using that cell phone. That's strictly against the rules here. Those things can interfere with the operation of machines."

"I'm sorry; I didn't know!"

"Well, you know now." She stomped down the hall leaving Jeremy feeling even more miserable.

The stressed-out teen paced up and down the lobby. The adrenaline was flowing even more violently now, and he needed to fight or flee. *How do I fight? There's nothing I can do except get out of here, and I'm going to do that as soon as Dad and Lisa arrive. I can't be around here if Maria dies. I couldn't take it.*

He was barely able to fight back the temptation to flee before the adults arrived. His dad arrived first. "Dad, I can't stick around here. I've got to get away."

Paul, with a serious expression on his face, looked Jeremy right in the eyes. "I understand."

"When I say away, I mean way away. I'm going to go down to Ocean Shores. The ocean seems to be beckoning me right now."

"You know it's January. The ocean isn't exactly the most beautiful place in the world in the winter."

"You're right, and I do know. And that's why it's a good spot to go to be alone. I'll have my cell phone in case you need to contact me."

"Are you just driving down there and coming back when it's dark?"

"No. I'm spending the night down there."

"You have your baptism in the morning."

"Maybe. I don't know if I'm going to get baptized or not. That's one of the things I'll be deciding while I'm at the beach."

"I see. Where are you going to sleep?"

"In my car, I guess."

"Remember that place down there where we stayed with my friend?"

"Yeah. You mean Tony?"

"Right. I don't think he'll mind if you crash at his place. They don't use it much in the winter. He keeps a spare key taped to the underside of a big flowerpot next to the door. Make sure you clean up after yourself."

"I'll check it out, maybe."

"Be careful."

"I always am, aren't I? I'm going to leave before Lisa gets here. I don't want to face her. I'd start bawling on the spot."

"All right. I'll explain to her. She'll understand."

"You know, Dad, if I could do anything at all, even if I had to fight a bunch of lions barehanded, I wouldn't be running away."

"I know that, son. Don't worry about it."

Jeremy made his exit. He saw Lisa's bright yellow car drive into the parking lot just before he pulled out. He heaved a big sigh. After rounding up his sleeping bag, toiletries, some clean clothes and food, he loaded up the Ion and motored over to the freeway. He had two hours of running away before he'd reach the sand and roar of the waves that would hopefully drown out the cry of his heart.

The miles passed by almost effortlessly and comfortably in his new car with the cruise control on. Jeremy hardly noticed. He had a date with destiny. The travel was simply a necessary evil to arrive at the site where his future would be decided. The urge to let his vehicle drift off the road into a bridge came and went more than once. This was one area where he could fight. The vision of John Baker came to him. Another vision of Lance Masterson ready to take his own life also haunted him. 'You're never beat till you quit' pulsated through his brain. "I am not going to quit!" he yelled into his dashboard.

When the Saturn pulled into Ocean Shores, Jeremy had to consider a new problem. *My car is brand new, but if I park on the wet beach, it's going look like a junk heap.* Instead of parking as close to the water as possible, he chose a place where he could park on cement. He grabbed his cell phone and walked down to the water. *Messy shoes and socks will have to be dealt with when I come back. There are more important things to think about right now.*

The ocean had always filled him with a sense of wonder. The waves kept crashing onto the shore, one after another, like a watery metronome used by the orchestral conductor of the universe. Luckily, he'd arrived between rain showers. A few sun breaks even showed patches of blue in the gray quilt canopy

above. His problems could be addressed without worrying about the weather. He scanned the horizon. Whenever they had visited this spot, he had been fascinated to look out and see nothing but water for as far as he could see. What he saw was just the beginning of the expanse known as the Pacific Ocean. It was hard to believe it continued like that for thousands of miles. It made him feel very small. *And this whole ocean is just a drop in the bucket in comparison to the galaxy. And the Milky Way galaxy is just a little blob of chocolate in comparison to the universe.*

The sight of water reminded him about his appointment with a watery, symbolic death the next day. *What if Maria dies? I know I said that I'd be baptized no matter what, but staring in the face of death changes a lot of things. I don't know.*

Quiet voices started whispering in his ear. "There's no hurry. You can always be baptized later. You want to do that when Maria can watch. If Maria dies, there is really no reason to get baptized at all. You're only doing that for her benefit. So what's the purpose if she's gone?"

*I really don't need to rush this.*

"Maybe you should rethink your decision. Why would you give up your life and your plans for a God that you can't even prove exists? You deserve to be happy, live your own life, and do what you want to do. Don't throw all that away for nothing."

*Maybe, I need to forget all this religion stuff and concentrate on a major league baseball career. That's my real dream. What did I ever see that made me get so excited about Christianity? This was all about Maria, and now she might be out of the picture.*

The frustration pent up inside him for the past several days burst a hole in the emotional dam. Jeremy started grabbing rocks as fast as he could and hurling them into the water as far as he could throw. Finally, his arm began to hurt, and he got dizzy, reminding him he was still dealing with a concussion and needed to avoid sudden movements of his head. Embarrassment replaced the frustration.

*I'm lucky I walked far enough from the road that no witnesses were present to see me go crazy. Maybe that's why I came down here. I'm safe from familiar eyes. Even if someone did see me, it's no big deal because they don't know me from Adam.*

The name Adam struck him in a funny way. His memory flashed back to the viewing of the movie at Maria's house about the Bible.

The voices in his head became louder. "That's a bunch of old wives' tales and fairy tales. That book was written by guys who

just didn't want you to have fun. Do what you want to do. You're a man now and you can call your own shots."

Jeremy's attitude was becoming more negative by the minute. A vision from an old rerun of *Star Trek* flashed into his head. Captain Kirk was fighting with another man. Kirk had him pinned to the ground with a chokehold. The man turned into an ugly monster, which was frightening enough to cause a man to lose his grip, but the Captain hung on. The creature turned into something else and still the Captain held on. Finally the illusionist was defeated because Captain Kirk paid no attention to the attempted deceptions, but instead clung to the reality that the man was nothing more than a human.

*What does that have to do with anything? Why is Star Trek invading my thoughts when I'm battling for my future? Why can't I focus on the target here? What am I going to do about the baptism?*

"Would you really serve a God who let Maria die? That either makes him a cruel God or a powerless one. Why would you devote your life to such a deity? You don't need him. You're the only God you'll ever need. Don't take yourself off the throne."

*That's true. I don't need him. What's he done for me? Why was I even considering giving up my life? There's no way I'm going through with that baptism.*

One more vision floated into his head, silencing the voices for a moment.

The vision consisted of Maria's face, the touch of her hand upon his chin, and a conversation from the past. "Lots of people struggle with prayer, Jeremy. It's your number one weapon against the enemy. He'll do everything possible to keep you from praying. Remember that. Promise me that if you ever find yourself in a desperate situation, and you're contemplating doing something stupid, pray first before you do anything."

*I remember making that promise. Now is the time to deliver and keep that promise for Maria.*

He dropped down on his knees and cried out, "Father in Heaven." The voices in his ear sounded like the drone of a million mosquitoes. "In the name of Jesus I come to you." It was like a blindfold had been removed from Jeremy's eyes. Suddenly he realized the voices in his head weren't his imagination or his own ideas. He was being jerked around by the biggest jerk in the world. He screamed in anger, "Satan, I rebuke you in the name of Jesus. Get thee behind me. I give you no place in my life, Satan. You're a liar, and I don't listen to liars."

The confusion was now totally gone and so were the voices. *Why didn't I see what was happening sooner? I was almost blindsided by an enemy I was aware of. What's it like for people who aren't aware?*

"Father, please forgive me for listening to your enemy, our enemy. Forgive me for everything, Lord. For my lack of faith. For my anger. Forgive my fear and my doubt. Please let me get my feet upon the rock and not on the shifting sand. You have called me to die to myself. I can see why now because I have so many weaknesses which I don't even see. Humility is the way I was taught. Pride reigns in me though. I can face the world because I'm Jeremy Dillon, star athlete, star pupil, and a strong man. I confess my lack of strength to you right now. I am nothing unless you make me into something. Jeremy Dillon is dead as of this moment. If I stand up and walk away from here, it will be as a new man, one filled with your love and your compassion and your strength. I trust you. When the journey gets too hard for me, carry me, please. If we go by car, I'll let you drive. As for Maria, she belongs to you and not me. Your will be done in her life as it is in mine. I wanted her for me. I now give her back to you. If you choose to take her home, I accept that choice." The tears flowed freely as he continued to pray. Gradually his prayer changed, and he began to praise. The same words that had stuck in his mouth earlier flowed as freely as his tears. Finally, the flow of both stopped. Rather than feeling empty, Jeremy felt full. He stood up again, wobbly due to having been on his knees for so long.

He wasn't sure how long he had remained in the sand crying out to God. Darkness was approaching. He needed to get back before the light was gone, or he might not find his car until morning. *How many people are walking in darkness because they refuse to seek the light?* He saw that the devil, just like the man in his *Star Trek* vision, changes shapes and forms in order to deceive and to frighten, but in the end, he is still the same powerless liar.

As he walked along the sand, he looked back at his footprints. Were those his own footprints, or had they been made by Jesus when he carried Jeremy through the tough terrain? His thoughts went back to Maria. *If Maria dies, God is still in control. Maybe she was too beautiful for this life. Maybe her work on Earth is over. Whatever. I'm not going to sweat the details of life anymore. Everything comes out OK in the end for the person who loves God and is called according to his purpose.*

When he neared the parking area, he discovered a group of

young people around a campfire. As he got close enough to hear them, they began to sing along with the strumming of a guitar:

"We are one in the spirit; we are one in the Lord. And we pray that all unity will one day be restored. And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love; yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love."

Jeremy stopped and listened to the following verses. It was beautiful. When the song finished, one of the boys in the group jumped up and ran over to Jeremy. "Would you like to join us?"

He was going to drive home since the question of his baptism and agony over Maria had both been resolved. However, he was drawn to this group of young people. "Yeah. As a matter of fact, I would. I have to run to my car to get my flashlight, but I'll be right back."

"Cool."

Jeremy performed his mission and returned to the campfire. There were a dozen boys and girls, all with shining faces and eyes manifesting a joy within. They welcomed him to the group and introduced themselves.

"Are you a Christian?" one girl asked.

Jeremy was going to explain that he was going to be baptized in the morning. Then it dawned on him he had already died to himself tonight. The baptism was now a formality which was an outward sign of what had happened on the inside. "Yes, I am."

Several hours later, after sharing in a feast of hot dogs, marshmallows, and love, Jeremy returned to his car. He had met twelve new brothers and sisters. They had told him there were several million more to meet. The members of this group came from different churches. They had formed their little group to share God's love despite the differences in church doctrine. They said that love was their spiritual compass. Jeremy had enjoyed himself thoroughly. He only regretted that Maria wasn't there to share it with him. He would tell her about it when he got back home and visited the hospital again. *She must still be alive. Dad never called.*

After cleaning as much sand off him as he could, Jeremy made a quick change of clothes and threw the sandy stuff into a plastic bag, which went into the trunk. He was just about the close the door when a voice stopped him.

"Hey, Jeremy."

He poked his head out and saw one of his new friends from

the beach. "Yeah?"

"Got an hour free? There's a video I'd like to show you."

Jeremy looked at his watch. It was getting pretty late. *What the heck?* "Sure. Let's do it."

"Jump in with me. I'll bring you back when we're done. That way I don't have to worry about you getting lost."

"Works for me. Lost is no fun. If I remember right, your name is Mark."

"You got it."

Jeremy locked his car and jumped in with his host. After a twisting ride around town, they pulled into a driveway.

"This is it. Home, sweet home."

"Nice place. So, what's this video about?"

"It's a message on YouTube from a fiery missionary type named Paul Washer. He is absolutely on fire for the Lord. His passion just blows me away. He goes into jungles and other less than pleasant places to share the gospel. One of his qualities is that he does not pull punches but talks straight from the hip."

"That's quite a trick. Is he a ventriloquist?"

Mark grinned. "Oops. I guess that phrase only makes sense if you use the word shoot."

"I think you're right."

Mark held the door open, and Jeremy entered. An hour later Jeremy walked out the door a different man than the one who had walked in.

"That video just blows me away," Jeremy said.

"I knew it would. That's why I wanted you to stop by."

"Some of those things that he talked about have been going through my head before tonight. I just couldn't come up with answers. Now at least I realize that other people think the way I do. That's a good feeling."

"No doubt Mr. Washer ruffles some people's feathers when he says that a majority of the people in churches are going to Hell."

"Yeah. I was wondering about that. What do you think about that type of statement? Definitely not politically correct."

"To put in mildly." Mark scratched his head. "That's a really hard question. Most people want to believe that all they have to do is say that little prayer."

"Do you have a problem with that too? I'm almost afraid to tell people that I don't find the sinner's prayer scriptural, especially the way it is handled in some churches. Coming to Jesus demands real repentance from your sins. It's not something that can be washed away by waving a hand where nobody but the pastor



sees it and having him pray the sinner's prayer while the person who raised his hand sits there listening."

"I know what you mean, Jeremy. This is a real sticky situation. You can get into some real intense arguments over the topic of salvation. Some Christians say you don't have to do anything – actually that you can't do anything to earn salvation. They might say you have to believe that the Bible is without error. Others say you have to repent of your sins."

"Some say you have to be baptized. I'm going to be tomorrow."

"That's great, Jeremy. How long have you been a Christian?"

Jeremy looked at his watch. "About four hours."

"You're kidding. That must have happened down on the beach?"

"Exactly. I really had come to the conclusion that God does exist and Jesus is the Son of God a while back, but I was struggling with trying to decide what that requires. It was a tangled mess. To some people I was already a believer. To others I was going to Hell until I gave my heart to the Lord, despite the fact they claimed salvation is free and there is nothing we can do to earn it. Nothing. Wouldn't that include saying a sinner's prayer or asking the Lord into your heart – neither concept which I've run across when reading the Bible. It was so confusing. There's the passage from *Revelations* that talks about God spewing us out of his mouth if we're lukewarm."

"Uh-huh. I've been there, Jeremy. What happens to a guy who raises his hand and claims the free gift of salvation and then later simply goes about living his life for himself and paying no heed to God's commandments?"

"Exactly. Or worse yet, a guy who was a pastor who now claims that God is a Fig Newton of our imagination and Christianity is a bunch of garbage."

"I've known a lot of Mormons over the years. Many of them are very devoted to God and live a life which reflects the fruits of the Spirit. Yet some Christians claim the Mormons, many of whom have spent a lifetime of loving and serving God and his son Jesus, are going to hell. On the other hand, some guy who never raised a finger in God's service, after he raised his hand to claim his free prize of salvation, can't lose his Heavenly mansion no matter what he does, as long as he trusts that that's enough to get him into Heaven."

"I am so glad I decided to come over here. These are the same issues I've been wrestling with."

Mark slapped at a mosquito. "One thing that bugs me is that we hear about the great virtue of the American dream. Owning a nice house and two new cars and belonging to the country club, etcetera. That has been pounded into people's heads. I'm thoroughly convinced that concept is diametrically opposed to the real message of Christ."

"You're not saying we should live in mud huts and ride donkeys, right?"

"Let me put it this way: Paul said that to live was Christ and to die was Christ. He was comfortable in poverty and among riches. They were all the same to him. He just didn't pay attention to them because his mind was focused on his mission of taking the gospel to all the world. The worldly culture is focused on their mission of dying with the most toys. Lots of people who profess to be Christians are living by the world's standards. Their Christianity is just an add-on to their lives, like their membership at the country club or yacht club."

"This is new territory for me. Are you saying that having a yacht is a sin?"

Mark put his hand up. "Some people might interpret it that way, but that's not what I'm saying. You know that commercial about the camera that uses the punch line 'image is everything'?"

Jeremy nodded. "With the tennis player?"

"Exactly. With God, image is nothing. He's not concerned with the image but the reality. So take a man who has been blessed financially. He has lots of money to throw around. That money can enhance his image with the world. Because he has the biggest yacht at the yacht club, he can get respect from the other yacht owners. Or because he drives a Mercedes or a BMW or something, he can get respect from those people who drive cars, which is basically all of us. If that's his purpose in life, Jesus said he's already had his reward. What does that bode for his eternal future?"

"I don't know."

"Take a man who makes good money. He has \$50,000 to spend on a car. But instead of buying the \$50,000 car, he buys a nice mid-range car for \$25,000 and sends the rest to Jim Robison's Life Outreach International or some other organization that feeds the hungry. His image among fellow drivers and people that know him isn't going to be enhanced, but several hundred people may be alive because of his donation that fed them. Which one is God going to be the happiest with?"

Jeremy nodded. "That's a no-brainer."

"You see the man did not give up comfort. His new vehicle has air-conditioning and power everything and cushy seats. He hasn't given up anything except the image of being a cool, rich guy. Do you see what I mean?"

"What if he just hung onto his slightly older car and used the whole \$50,000 to bless others."

"Even better in the eyes of God and, of course, a drop in the human ratings."

"But he'll improve his image as a Christian by giving all that money."

Mark shook his head. "Not if he does it right. Jesus said that the left hand shouldn't know what the right hand is doing – or vice versa. Giving can be just another way of enhancing worldly image. Some people try to win the world's favor by being charitable. In the perfect world, nobody will know that the man is silently being a hero. His reward is not in this life."

"Wow. That blows my mind. What about this situation? A man owns a house with five bedrooms and four bathrooms and lives by himself. A few miles away people are sleeping in cardboard boxes under freeway overpasses. Should he sacrifice his privacy and orderly lifestyle to house people who are down and out?"

Mark blew out a deep breath. "Everybody has to make their own decisions on things like that. Not many people are going to want something like that preached at them."

"Does that make it wrong?"

"Oh, definitely not. Much of what Jesus had to say was revolutionary and revolting to his audiences. He talked about the latter days when men would have itching ears to hear the doctrine that they want presented to them. They want to be able to keep their image and their comfort and their salvation. God said he wanted no graven images before him. Does that include the images that we create as people?"

"Am I being judgmental if I think that some people seem to use Christianity like an insurance policy?"

"Oooh. You used the 'J' word. That along with the 'L' word are taboo in many Christian circles."

Jeremy scratched his head. "What's the 'L' word?"

"Legalism."

"You're getting me confused. Let's deal with one at a time. It's not right to judge, correct?"

"That's not what the Bible says. We have to judge continually. What Jesus warned us against is judging people. That's his responsibility. We're to judge doctrine, words, and behavior. So for

you to judge me to be a scumbag because I do something wrong is not kosher."

"I wouldn't do that."

"No, but some people do. I'm honestly trying to find God's truth. Also, Jesus said that the judgment we use on others would be applied to ourselves. We'd all like to be given the benefit of the doubt. We need to do that same for others. For someone to judge me as a moron or a legalist because I believe something different than they do would be unfair."

"Right back to that other word."

Mark nodded. "Yeah. Good segue into the explanation. Legalism is laying down the letter of the law. Thou shalt nots and thou shalt rule the day." Mark scratched his head. "For example, let's take church attendance. A legalist might say that we have to go to church every week because the Bible says do not forsake the assembling of the saints."

"And that's not received well by those who like the freedom of staying home to watch the big football game or taking off on camping trips."

"Exactly. The letter of the law kills where the spirit of the law gives life. People shouldn't have to give up vacations because they can't miss church. But also they shouldn't be missing church just because they decide they'd rather go shopping or something else that they could do another time. To me that's lukewarm Christianity, but judging the people is up to God. Only he knows their hearts. Does that make sense?"

Jeremy nodded. "Yep. I hate to open my mouth and insert my sneaker here, but somehow I just have this feeling that church should be more than it is."

"In what way?"

"It seems that it becomes a ritual. You have eighteen minutes of worship followed by announcements followed by an offering and announcements. The pastor concludes the service with a sermon, which could bore people to tears or put them to sleep. Every week it's the same routine. Only a handful of people get to do anything except sit. It seems to me that people might be more excited about attending church if they had a chance to get stimulated through interaction of some type. I don't know. I'm such a new churchgoer that I hate to criticize. There must be something I'm missing."

"Jeremy, you have some valid points. If that's all there is to church, people could stay home and watch a service on television. I've talked to people about this issue. After the service most

people run out the doors back to their lives outside. A few cliques of friends gather to talk and then they depart. Strangers who have come in looking for help are ignored unless they work up the courage to ask someone."

"I know what you mean. Since God is everywhere, we don't need to go to a special place to worship him, right?"

"That's true. Then what's the purpose of church? Why don't people worship in their bedroom? Or in the forest where they're camping? Why are the saints supposed to assemble?"

"My personal take on this is that a church should be like a hospital. There are three types of people who come: those who need help, those who want to provide help, and visitors."

"By needing help, you mean they need to find Jesus?"

"Maybe, but not necessarily. Take a believer for example. During the week he or she got served divorce papers or got a pink slip at work. Their house is getting repossessed or a child was diagnosed with a serious or fatal illness. This is a person that a week ago was looking to help others. On this given Sunday they need help. They need hugs and someone to really let them know they are loved."

"Love is a key element here, isn't it?"

"Jeremy, love is everything. Jesus said there were two great commandments – love God and love people. That summarizes what Christianity is supposed to be about. Instead we often get cold doctrine and promises that people will pray for us. God forbid that we hold a person in our arms and let them cry some pain away. Churches shouldn't be sterile. We need to touch people even if they might give us diseases. If we don't, we already have a disease which is worse than anything we could contract."

"Sterile. I like that word. I keep envisioning people at church trying to sit as far as they can from other people and shying away from holding hands with others. We're supposed to be brothers and sisters, but we treat people like they have cooties."

"Like an email that might have a virus."

"Exactly. Good analogy, Jeremy. My friend was telling me about the lengths that companies go to to prevent the viruses from attacking their network. They end up preventing people from getting their work done because of all the protective restraints they apply. People can't receive a file with the data they need because the document might contain a virus."

"I don't know that much about computer networks, but it sounds applicable. To me the picture of people wearing protective gloves and masks over their faces and carrying bottles of

disinfectant is the perfect example of sterility. I can understand how those standards need to be applied to real germs, but in the situation with Christianity the harmful doctrine they are trying kill could potentially be God's truth."

"Wow. That's scary." Jeremy waved his hand in front of his face to scare away a mosquito. "Maybe I'm wrong here, but I get this impression that some people go to church to make an impression. It's a chance for them to put on their nice clothes and socialize and even make business contacts."

"I think you're right. Satan is our enemy, but most of the trouble we get into as Christians is because of the flesh and the pride of the flesh. We like to be lifted up and feel good about ourselves. Being loved, honored, and respected are things we seek. There's nothing wrong with that, but most people try to obtain those things in the worldly way."

"How do you know so much about this stuff, Mark? You're barely older than I am."

"I'm a senior at college. My parents came to the Lord after I was born. They had struggled with a lot of things about religion and church. We've talked on numerous occasions about these topics. Works versus grace. Salvation and eternal security. The seven deadly sins, of which pride is at the top. Their warnings to me about the pits and snares of the world and even Christianity have given me insight. And I have found friends at college and the kids at the beach tonight who share in the same values."

"That's great. My dad was an atheist and my mother was dead, so I have received no foundation at all in following God."

"I'm sorry about that. Too many kids have stories like that. It's important to have kids discover Jesus and start walking in his ways when they're young."

"I'm going to make up for lost time."

"I'm sure you will, Jeremy. Once my parents chose the way of the cross, they got burned more than once by 'believers'. It would have been easy for them to pack it up and run away. Instead they obtained wisdom and saw that they can't judge Christianity and Christ based on what some people professing Christianity say and do. There's a book I would recommend to you."

"I like to read. What's the name?"

"*Pilgrim's Progress*. It was written back in the 1600's by a man in prison. His crime was preaching without a license. The book has been a classic for a long time. Anyway the book is about the journey of a man named Christian, and all of the different temptations that a Christian must deal with on the journey of

following Christ. I always had the picture of a gauntlet. You know, the lines of people, and a person has to run between the lines and suffer the blows from clubs."

"Yeah. I've read about that. We used to have a similar drill in football except they used something a little less damaging than clubs."

"Unfortunately some of the people lined up to get their swings claim to be Christians. You need to be aware of that and don't let it throw you when it happens. Keep your eyes on Christ and not on the people who claim to be following him. You'll only get lost otherwise."

"Good advice. That might be like a religious version of the post office. Jesus says yada yada. Paul quotes Jesus to some guy. That guy quotes Paul to another guy who quotes the friend to yet another person. Pretty soon there's no similarity to the original."

Mark nodded. "Not a bad analogy, except we have the Bible. We always have the original. You have a good heart. I don't want to see you get burned and burned-out by people who don't. I once heard someone say that Christians are the only soldiers that bury their wounded. If you're ready for it, you won't be blindsided and perhaps fall away as a result."

"I hear you. Personally I haven't suffered yet, but I found a website where the author blasted half of the leaders of the Christian world."

"I've run into those types too. In a way, I have some respect for them because they stand up for what they believe, but when they're standing on the toes of a Godly man as a result of their stand, they could be dancing with the devil."

"Am I crazy to think some people would rather think they're right than to continue to search for a more perfect truth?"

"Jeremy, your sanity is secure. There are people like that. Do you remember the litmus tests from science class?"

"Of course."

"We need to have litmus paper that we can put into a container of doctrine to see if it turns color or not. Unfortunately, we don't have any bulletproof tests like that. We have the Bible, but that's open to people's interpretation. Many of the people that are arguing about doctrine are using the same scriptures, yet they come up with different conclusions."

Jeremy exhaled audibly. "I wish I could have talked to you a few months ago. All of the bickering I see and the inability to arrive at a standard set of beliefs made me confused. God isn't a god of

confusion. There must be some elementary truth about which there is no controversy, at least among believers."

"Jesus is the Son of God, and he died that we might have life more abundantly."

"That's good. How about 'do unto others as they would do unto you?'"

"That's a keeper. The greatest men in the kingdom of God will be the servants of all."

"That says to me that the most honored ones in Heaven will be the common people walking around on the Earth that nobody pays any attention to. Some of the TV preachers who sport their fingers full of diamonds and fancy suits will get assigned to a cabin in the back yard whereas a guy who people looked down on because of his clothing or his house or his lack of cool will be living in a mansion. That one blows my mind."

"You have a good mind, Jeremy. Jesus said that to whom much is given, much is expected. He has blessed you, and now you need to honor and serve him. Don't be paralyzed by the fear that someone will think you're wrong, and that you're a scumbag."

Jeremy nodded. "We must seek and find the truth no matter what that truth is even if we don't like that truth."

"Good philosophy. I wish people from all walks of life would accept that challenge." Mark slapped another mosquito and flicked the lifeless body into the grass.

"The mosquitoes are getting really bad. I better let you go before they carry us away. I can't tell you how much I enjoyed talking with you, Mark."

"Ditto, Jeremy." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a card. "This has my email address on it. Keep in touch, please."

The two boys hugged. Jeremy started to walk to the driveway but then smacked himself in the forehead and whirled around. "Wait a second, Mark. My car's still down at the beach."

"Oh, you're right. Let me grab my keys, and I'll get you back there ASAP. We were so immersed in our conversation that we both spaced."

After they got on the road, Mark said, "There was one more thing I wanted to talk to you about, somewhat tied to being judgmental. Being a Christian has peaks and valleys. One day you might have a mountaintop experience and be on top of the world, and the next day you're down in the dumps. Don't worry when the downtime hits. Just remember that it will pass and hang in there."

"Thanks, Mark. I'll keep that in mind."



"It's especially bad when you're sick or really tired. You just don't feel like fighting the good fight. That's one reason why we should only judge people with a fair judgment. They might be suffering from something which is bringing them down. Can you imagine somebody who doesn't know Billy Graham running into him when he's in a valley experience? The guy might consider Billy Graham to be a man of little faith or maybe even a backslider. I don't think God wants us to be so hot and cold, but the human condition plays a big role. That's one reason why we're advised to consider our body as the temple of the Holy Spirit. If the body can't keep up with the spirit, things are a mess."

"Isn't there a quote in the Bible that says something like the spirit was willing but the flesh was weak?"

"Yep. Perfect example."

Jeremy was glad that he had ridden with Mark. He was getting sleepy and wasn't sure he would have found his way out of town. After Mark dropped him off and Jeremy got back into his car, he realized how tired he was. He looked down at his watch. *Oh, my gosh. Where did the time go? He yawned widely. It wouldn't be smart to attempt the two-hour drive in my condition. Looks like I better check out Tony's place. My gosh! I haven't thought of Maria for a couple of hours. God has had my full attention, and suddenly Maria is almost an afterthought. Maybe that's the way God wants it. Perhaps this is an out of sight out of mind situation. Should I feel guilty about forgetting about her and about abandoning her?*

Jeremy drove until he found the summer cabin owned by their friend. With the help of the flashlight, he located the key his dad mentioned and let himself in. He immediately unfolded his sleeping bag on the floor and lay down. The last thing he did was to set the alarm on his watch to wake him up early, so there would be plenty of time to get back home before the baptism. His head barely hit the floor before he was sound asleep.

## Chapter 14

### Picking Up the Pieces

Jeremy awoke the next morning and looked up at the ceiling. He didn't recognize it. *Where am I? Oh, yeah, I spent the night at Tony's in Ocean Shores. Wait, how can I see the ceiling before sunup? I set the alarm for six a.m. It should still be dark out.* With a sinking feeling he glanced at his watch. *Crap! It's almost nine! How could I sleep so late? Why didn't my alarm go off? No time to figure that out now. I gotta hurry. Baptism is in a little over two hours and I'm not even ready to go.*

He needed to use the bathroom and brush his teeth. *Dad told me to clean up the cabin after myself. There's no time for cleanup, so I won't use the bathroom here. The gas tank needs to be filled anyway, so I'll hit a gas station and do my thing there.*

He was afraid to look in the mirror. No doubt the bedhead was not dead. Fortunately, he had all the things he needed in his duffel bag, except time. He exited the cabin, locked the door, and replaced the key under the flowerpot. As quickly as he could, he loaded the car and spun out of the driveway. *It's a good thing it's Sunday, and traffic will be light.* "Lord, you talked me into getting baptized last night, so please help me get there on time. And forgive me if I go a teeny bit over the speed limit."

There was no gas station on his way out of Ocean Shores, so he kept on chugging down the highway. *Aberdeen is only a few miles down the road. I'm going to have to slow down to go through the town anyway, and there are several gas stations. Hopefully my bladder will hold out.* His cell phone was in his pocket. With a great degree of difficulty, he fished it out without slowing down. *I better call Dad and let him know I'm coming. I wonder why he didn't call me.* When he flipped the cover open, the second sinking feeling of the day hit him. The screen was totally black. *My phone wasn't even on!* He hit the 'on' button. No response. *Check that. The battery must be deader than a possum underneath the tires of a sixteen-wheeler. I'm going to have to use a payphone at the gas station to call home. No wonder Dad hasn't called today. When did the juice run out? I should have heard the warning signal. It might have been off since early yesterday afternoon. Maria could be dead right now, and Dad can't even reach me.*

*There is now another reason to reach Aberdeen quickly.*

Trying not to look at the price of gasoline, Jeremy wheeled into the first station he encountered. As the tank was filling, he left to find the restroom. With the fury of the Tasmanian devil cartoon character, he performed all of his toiletry functions at breakneck speed. His hair was going to be less than perfect today, but it did look much better than when he started. Hurriedly, he donned the clothes recommended by the pastor to be worn for the baptism. Tooth brushing finalized his preparations. He stormed out of the door and ran to the car. After depositing his things and finishing the task of filling the tank, he ran back to the payphone just outside the door of the gas station.

*Do I have enough quarters for a long-distance call?* His digging expedition through the pockets of his shorts yielded only two quarters. *I'll have to call collect.* After dialing the operator and placing a collect call, he waited. The operator reported that no one answered at the requested number. *Crap. Where is Dad? Maybe at the hospital! Wait, what about Dad's cell phone? I don't remember the number. It's on my cell phone. Wait, the battery's dead. Catch-22 strikes again. Should I call Lisa? I can't call her collect, and besides I don't have enough time. This is going to be close the way it is.* He ran back to the car and gunned the engine out of the driveway. The trip through Aberdeen seemed to take forever. *How can such a small town be so big?*

There would be no breakfast for him today. *Perhaps Dad will treat me to a big lunch to celebrate my baptism.* That sounded funny. *Just a few months ago his dad was so anti-God, he could have given Richard Dawkins a run for his money. Now he'll be the proud Papa, standing nearby to watch me make the biggest commitment of my life. How awesome is that?* "Thank you, God, for making this all work out. Still one detail though. If Maria is dead, don't let me know about it until after the baptism. I don't want anything to interfere with this now. That includes state patrolmen, so if you could keep those guys at the coffee shop today instead of setting a speed trap for me, I'd appreciate it."

The twenty-five-mile-an-hour speed limit almost caused him to lose his temper again. After five minutes, which seemed to be an hour, he reached a portion of road where the speed limit was back to fifty-five. He set the cruise control for sixty-two, so he was only bending the law a little. Usually, when he drove seven miles per hour over the speed limit, everybody whizzed by him. He just got up to speed when he came up on two slower-moving vehicles. They were driving side by side and Jeremy couldn't get by. He

barely suppressed the urge to scream. After a couple of miles of blocking the road, one of the cars finally exited off the highway, giving him the chance to pass the other car. *It's a wonder I didn't bite my tongue off back there.*

*Where is all that relaxed feeling of well-being that I enjoyed last night? The stress seems to be greater on my return trip than when I drove out here. Why didn't my watch alarm go off? I set it for six. Did I set the a.m. on it? No. Don't tell me I set it for p.m. Now I am going to scream. OK. Deep breath. Relax. What did you learn last night, guacamole for brains? Give God control and trust in him. So do it!*

"So Lord, if you're inclined to drop in and drive this beast, I'll be more than glad to turn over the wheel. It's a new car, you know? Oh, yeah, you would already know that. I'd love to see the face of a state trooper if he pulled you over and asked for ID. It doesn't look like you're going to show up though, so I'll figuratively let you drive, and I'll keep on steering and applying the brakes when necessary. Just so there are no misunderstandings, Lord, I have to be at Calvary no later than eleven. It's in your hands. It's important that I get myself put back together before I arrive, or they might not let me in the water. So calm my spirit, please."

He fiddled with the radio dial. *Maybe I can find something interesting.* When he heard the word 'Jesus', his hand stopped turning. *Perhaps this is a Christian station.* After listening for a couple of minutes, he was sure it was. The speaker mentioned St. Francis of Assisi. *Dang, I was going to look up that dude on Google, and I forgot.* The speaker quoted the Saint, and the words went right to the core of Jeremy's soul:

'Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace;  
where there's hatred, let me sow love;  
where there's injury, pardon;  
where there's doubt, faith;  
where there's despair, hope;  
where there's darkness, light;  
and where there's sadness, joy.  
O Divine Master,  
grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;  
to be understood, as to understand;  
to be loved, as to love;  
for it is in giving that we receive,  
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,  
and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.'

"Thanks, Lord, I needed that!"

It was now ten o'clock. There were still about thirty miles left before he could turn onto I-5 and head north.

It was after 10:30 when he reached the freeway. Thirty some miles stood between him and his appointment with the baptismal tank. Unless he sped up and went way over the speed limit, he couldn't make it on time. His gut instinct was to punch it and try. A more powerful force told him to be careful, and everything was going to be all right. *Is this the small still voice? Is this that peace that passes all understanding? How can I be at peace when I know I'm going to arrive just in time to see the last of the water drained out of the tank? I should have had my new friends baptize me in the ocean. Except that would have been slightly on the frigid side in January. It will all work out in the end. Just trust in the Lord and lean not onto your own understanding.*

Jeremy quit watching the clock, put on some music, and sang the rest of the way back to Sumner. He was totally laid back when he finally pulled off the freeway. *Two more blocks to navigate to the church.* It was impossible for him to not look at the clock now. How appropriate on the day of his baptism. The sinking feeling was back again, and he was going down for the third time. It was now 11:17.

The light was green so he was able to enter the church parking lot without stopping again. "Please let me find a parking place. People will be coming for the 11:30 service and filling it up." There was nothing open in the first section. He could see the baptismal font on the other side. A few people were still gathered around it. He turned sharply to drive past so he could, hopefully, get someone's attention and alert them to the fact he had arrived. A car started backing out ahead of him. *Thank you, Lord!* He maneuvered his car into the empty spot, jumped out of the car, and ran toward the church.

It looked like the last person had been baptized. People were starting to leave. Jeremy yelled. "Pastor Steve!" A few people halted in their tracks and waited for him. His youth pastor was one of them.

"Am I too late?" Jeremy said, trying to catch his breath.

"Another forty-eight seconds and you would have been. Jeremy Dillon, come on down! Take off those Adidas, your jacket and your socks, and we're ready to go. Wait, a second. Where's your change of clothes? After a January baptism, you'll want to get dry and warm quickly."

"I left them in the car. Do I have time—?"

"Hurry up!"

After sprinting to the car and back again, he was really out of breath. And now he was going underwater and would have to hold it. Fortunately, in the time it took him to remove his shoes and socks, his breathing returned closer to normal. Everything was in place, except him – and his dad. He took a quick look around at the small crowd and found no sign of his parent. *Oh, well. He might have been here earlier and gave up on me.*

"OK. Climb in and sit down in the middle," the pastor said.

Jeremy did as requested. The water was lukewarm, but definitely warmer than the air. His heart was pounding. *Is that from the sprint or from nervousness?*

"Make sure you plug your nose with one hand and hold your breath till you're all the way out of the water again. Grab that arm with your other hand to keep it out of the way. Got it?"

"No problem. Let's do it."

"Jeremy Dillon, do you promise to devote your life to your savior, Jesus Christ, and to live your life for him?"

"I do." *Sounds like a wedding. In a way it is.*

He felt his upper body going back toward the water. He squeezed his nose and eyes tight.

"I now baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen."

His face went under. He expected to be brought right back up. It wasn't happening. *Hello, Pastor. Don't forget me down here. Maybe I have to soak a little bit first. I'm going to relax. If he doesn't pull me out before I run out of air, I think I can pull myself up. The water is only three feet deep. Jeremy let go of his tension and went totally limp. Just as he got relaxed, his body was propelled out of the water.*

A warm towel was handed to him immediately as he got out of the tank. He put it over his face and began to dry his eyes. A body latched onto his and squeezed him tightly. He heard his father say, "Congratulations, Champ." *That's my father's voice but this isn't my father's embrace. From the feeling and the size, this has to be Lisa. It's nice that they both made it in time.* He pulled the towel away. A big smile lit up his face. Lisa was latched onto him so closely that he could see just part of her face. He had to crank his neck down to see that much. "Thanks, Lis—" There were cuts on her face, and underneath makeup some purple blotches were detectable. *What happened to her? She's almost as beat up as Maria.*

"Did you miss me, Preppie?"

*What did she say? Why is she doing this to me?* He wildly looked around seeking his father. Paul stood a few feet away with a beaming Lisa Masterson at his side. *What? If Lisa's over there, then this...has to be...but it can't be.* The girl mauling him finally stepped back and let him look her in the eye.

"You didn't answer my question, Preppie. Does that mean you didn't miss me?"

Jeremy fell on his knees and began to sob. Maria knelt at his side, and they joined hands and tears. Their hands went skyward as they gave thanks to God for what he'd done.

When the prayer was over, Paul tapped his son on the shoulder. "Excuse me. I really hate to break up this touching little reunion party, but the church service is going to start pretty soon, and if I don't get dunked now, I won't have time to change clothes."

"Say what? Get dunked? You're getting baptized too?"

"I will if you get out of my way."

Jeremy and Maria moved to the side, and Mr. Dillon repeated the journey Jeremy had just made. He got a big hug from both Maria and Jeremy when he came out.

Lisa stood close at hand. "I'll wait with my hug until you change clothes, if you don't mind?"

Paul grinned. "No problem, as long as I get two to make up for the delay!"

The next thing that happened stunned Jeremy almost as much as the last two events. Dr. Krishna walked up to Pastor Steve. "It says in this Bible in Acts 8:36, 'See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized?'"

Steve said, "Acts 8:37 says, 'If thou believe with all thy heart, thou may.'"

"And the end of the verse says, 'And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.' And so I do, Satish Krishna, believe Jesus is the Son of God. I'm ready to place my order, and I want what they're having." He pointed to Jeremy and Paul Dillon.

"This is highly irregular. A drive-by baptism. What the heck? If it was good enough for Philip, it's good enough for me."

After he came out of the water, Dr. Krishna got a big hug from everyone but Mrs. Masterson. He looked over at Lisa. "I know. You're waiting until I change my clothes."

They all broke into laughter.

Paul started gently ushering the kids toward the church. "Come on. We're late for church, and it's cold out here. Besides,

I'm anxious to collect some hugs."

Jeremy now noticed he was shivering and didn't object. *Maria is as wet as the people who got baptized after all the hugs.* Lisa handed her some dry clothes as they started toward the church entrance. She had come prepared to get wet.

Maria and Jeremy walked hand in hand to the bathroom. "Am I going to have to sit through church wondering what went on at the hospital after I left yesterday?"

"Looks like it. The wait will make the story that much sweeter."

"It can't be any sweeter."

\* \* \*

After church was over, the two couples got into Paul's car and drove toward Mama Stortini's.

Jeremy didn't waste any time. "So, now, please tell me what happened. How did you—"

"I'm not sure I'm the right person to tell the story, Einstein. I was kind of a bystander on this one. Mom, would you like the honors?"

"When you left the hospital, the swelling on Maria's brain was starting to increase. That's what caused the warning signals. The doctor was very concerned. If the swelling didn't go down by five p.m., he was going to send Maria to Seattle for brain surgery. All afternoon the swelling persisted. A couple of minutes before five, Maria opened her eyes. We were all stunned. She made a motion of writing on something. I gave her a pen and paper, and she wrote, 'Can you remove this hunk of plastic from my throat please, so I can talk?' The doctor was totally freaked out. At first he didn't want to, but after he did some tests and everything looked normal, he took out the tubes.

"The first thing she said was, 'Jeremy brought me back.' None of us had a clue what she was talking about. She wouldn't change her story."

"Did you say just before five p.m.?" asked Jeremy.

"Yep."

"Interesting. I was on the beach praying just about that time. How did she get out of the hospital in time for the baptism?"

"Let me have a turn," Paul said. "The doctor was really shaken up. Coma patients don't come out of a coma with a fully functioning mind. Get this. In the tests he ran on Maria, he found absolutely no evidence of damage to her head. She still had the cuts and bruises, but all brain activity was one hundred percent



normal. Maria wanted out immediately. The good doctor wanted her to stay all night for observation. This morning she was just as sharp as before the accident. When he came in this morning, she was doing homework for physics class. That was enough to convince the doctor she really was OK. The 'M' word dropped from his lips."

"Maria?" Jeremy asked.

"No, he declared that it was a miracle."

"So that's how he ended up in the baptismal font today? In fact, perhaps that's why you ended up there, Dad?"

"I was leaning towards it anyway, son, but I have to admit, seeing a miracle put me over the top."

They parked the car at the restaurant. "Can Maria and I go for a little walk before lunch?"

"Aren't you hungry?"

"That's a dumb question. We'll be back before the waitress even takes your order."

"OK. You snooze and you lose!"

"Not always, Dad. Sometimes you snooze, and it comes out just right. I'll explain that story later."

Jeremy and Maria strolled hand in hand to the tree where they had crashed. It was the first time they had seen it since the accident.

"There are some things I need to tell you, Maria. I devoted my life to the Lord. It belongs to him now. So maybe I'm supposed to be a pastor or a missionary now."

"Maybe, Jeremy. He'll tell you when the time is right if you seek him. There are lots of ways to live your life for God. Since you got baptized, can I assume you have all your questions answered now about truth and doctrine?"

"Not even close. I just knew this step was necessary. Now that I'm part of the family, I can research more into the rules of the home. Last night I had a long talk with a new friend. I'll tell you more later, but I'm convinced that doctrine needs to be flexible in some areas. One thing I'm sure of: where God is truly working, there will be love. What we believe may be important, but the love we have for God and other people is definitely critical."

"As Paul said in *Corinthians* 13:2: 'And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not love, I am nothing.'"

"Is that what you mean, Jeremy?"

"Exactly. My goal is to show the fruits of the Spirit. Can I do

that if I'm out of God's will?"

"Good point, Jeremy. It's like Paul gave us a little barometer to check our environment. If we don't have the fruits, we need some adjustments."

"You asked me if I missed you, Princess. Here's my answer. You know that fateful night a week ago, as soon as we reached the bowling alley, I was going to tell you something. I did tell you while you were in a coma. Now let me tell you again when you can respond to it."

Maria stood there waiting while Jeremy swallowed a lump in his throat.

"I love you with all my heart, Maria."

"I know, Jeremy. A girl doesn't have to be told she's loved to know it, but it sure is a nice experience. Perhaps you'd like to know that I love you, too."

He wrapped her up in his arms and bound her lips with his. Their bodies interlocked in an exquisite embrace right next to the tree that had almost torn them apart forever. For a couple of minutes, observant people in cars going by witnessed an outward display of true love.



